朱き弾丸のエトランジェ

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Vermillion
Etranger A Lire Rouge

Vermillion - Chapter Prologue

Demondal

A refreshing breeze blew over the rolling grassy plains. The blue sky was covered with many fluffy clouds that lazed along. Some rough-looking horsemen stood out in contrast to this picturesque scenery. There were ten of them. The two in the lead were different from the other eight. They wore the same leather cloaks and rode what appeared to be the same breed of dark brown horses. Only one of them had a rather heavy looking bag fastened to their saddle, but the rest of their equipment was roughly the same. The remaining eight on the other hand, looked terrible. They rode a variety of breeds of horses. Their equipment consisted of leather armor and worn out cloth, otherwise they were half-naked. Their weapons too, were but simple bows or bone spears and if not, then rust-covered swords. Although their gear was poor and lacked equality, all eight shared a glint of desire in their eyes.

The distance between the two fleeing horsemen and the eight horsemen in pursuit grew closer by the moment.

“Don’t let them escape! After them!”

“Get them!”

“Cut them off!”

The eight horsemen in pursuit raised their weapons and shouted vulgar slang with some jeers occasionally mixed in. Judging by their equipment and personalities, without a doubt “Highwaymen” or “Brigands” suited them. However, in contrast with their rough appearances, their coordination was magnificent. The two horsemen on the run seemed to be driven on as the other eight formed a fan shape. Each rider maintained a set distance from each other, and in the blink of an eye they were already half surrounded.

“Fire!”

The man wearing leather armor in front of the group raised his spear and shouted. It appeared that he was the leader of the brigands. Following his orders, the pair of archers on each flank nocked arrows in their simple short bows.

On the right flank, a man with a tattooed face shouted, “Fuck you!!!”

Using that as their signal, the other three also drew their bowstrings taut and simultaneously loosed their arrows. The arrows whistled slightly in the air. Whether the two fleeing horsemen heard it, or looked back by chance, they immediately changed course, cleverly maneuvering their horses to dodge the arrows, one after another.

The abilities of the pursuers with the bow, and the abilities of the pursued with handling their horses. The difference in those abilities was clear. The two horsemen's goal was to let them waste their arrows.

"…tch. Aim for the one on the right!"

The leader clicked his tongue and gave his orders. All at once they focused on the single rider on the right. From the start, the one on the right had the large leather bag attached to the saddle. His movements were slower than the one on the left. The horseman under the concentrated fire earnestly dodged the incoming arrows. However, the severity of the barrage only intensified, and then suddenly an arrow struck its mark.

"!!"

The horse with the arrow stabbed in its rear end whinnied and wildly tumbled to the ground. The leather bag attached to the saddle spilled opened and bottles filled with a blue liquid scattered across the ground.

The rider seemingly jumped off of his saddle right beforehand. He stretched out his legs, having learned how to properly fall, and was left almost completely unharmed.

"One of 'em is down!"

"Hyahaa! Kill him!"

The brigands spurred their horses on to ferocious speeds.

"Haahahaha, dieee!"

A cruel smile crept over the brigand leader's face as he stuck out his spear and charged straight at his scrambling prey. The sharp spearhead emitted a fiendish light.

In the face of the approaching spear the unsaddled horseman had jumped to his feet and threw his cloak into the air. He then turned his back on the brigands and started to run at full speed.

The brigand leader sneered, clearly thinking that he was an idiot. Even with his speed, he couldn't outrun a horse.

The distance between them closed in the blink of an eye. The brigand leader mercilessly stabbed at the defenseless back of the escaping prey. The honed spearhead easily caught the cloak, piercing through it.

However, it was light. Too light. The cloak wrapped itself around the spear since it met no resistance. He realized all too late. At that moment, the horse the brigand leader was riding let out a whinny out of pain, before falling forward.

He was tumbling.

The brigand leader, unable to keep himself in his saddle, was flung forward and slammed into the ground on his back. "Gue-!" He let out a cry of pain due to the impact.

The spear fell from his hand, but he paid it no heed as he quickly stood up, unsheathing the sword at his waist.

The horse he had been riding but a moment ago was writhing in agony with its fore-left

leg cut off.

In the very next moment, a black shadow fell upon him. The brigand leader, having seen the true form of his enemy, opened his eyes wide with fright.

“Y-You’re!”

He trembled as the black shadow silently ignored him and held his saber at his side. The whole time the shadow’s blue eyes were narrowed. The shadow was a young boy with blonde hair and blue eyes. He could probably be mistaken for a girl with his small stature. He had fearless, sharp blue eyes. He kept his long blonde hair in a ponytail on the back side of his head as to keep it from getting in the way. Readied in his right hand was a plain and simple saber. Although, the words that would fit him best would be —

Completely black.

On his forehead was a black iron forehead protector, his face up to his nose was covered by a black scarf, he wore black leather gauntlets and black leather shin-guards. His body was wrapped entirely in black cloth. On his belt was a sheathed black dagger, and on his back was the black scabbard of his saber. That appearance was undoubtedly a —

“–『Ninja』!” groaned the brigand leader.

“Ninja”.

Although he wasn’t a true Japanese “Ninja”. He was more of a foreigner’s embellished idea of a 『Ninja』.

“Ninja! Andrei the Ninja!?”

“Holy shit!! He’s the real one!?”

“In just that moment he switched himself for his cloak…!”

The rest of the brigands began to tremble as well.

Andrei the Ninja.

Within this world he was among the most prominent, and his skills and appearance lived up to his reputation.

In the face of the powerful Andrei, his underlings shook in fear, but the brigand leader ignored them. The waves of shock subsided and were slowly replaced by the feeling of his blood boiling. It was his fighting spirit. He wanted to trade blows with someone strong. He wanted to test his power. It was a pure desire.

“…I’ve wanted to try ya once ya know…!”

His frightened expression was replaced by a ferocious smile. He readied his longsword, aiming the tip at Andrei’s head. At the same time, Andrei became a black blur. Then came a flash of silver and the sound of the air being cut. He knew he’d been cut. The brigand leader tried to let out a dumbfounded “Wha-?” Then he realized something.

He couldn’t speak. In his peripheral vision he could see the red blood spraying from his own neck. His vocal chords had most likely been destroyed. His carotid had also been cut to pieces. The attack was a quick and clean one shot, one kill.

The still-dumbfounded brigand leader simply mouthed his surprise. He received a 『Bleed Out Death』 message and fell to the ground like a doll. Just like that, he wordlessly became a 『Corpse』.

“B-Boss!”

“You asshole, you dare-?!”

Two of the brigands flew into a rage rather than freezing in fear. They leaned into their horses and charged at Andrei. The two brigands specialized in long handled weapons such as spears and clubs. They charged at full speed and tried to surround him.

Andrei readied his saber in his left hand, and pulled out his black dagger with the other.

“Take thiisss–!”

“Dieeeeeeeeee–!”

Both of the underlings raised their weapons as they charged forward. At first glance, Andrei was in a dire situation. However, he himself was calm. He knew he wasn’t alone.

Crack! The sound of what sounded like a branch snapping echoed through the air.

“What was that?” said the scraggly bearded, spear wielding brigand. With a puzzled expression he turned to look behind him.

Something was whistling through the air. In the next moment, the scraggly bearded brigand’s head was sent flying. Like a fountain, blood spurted out from his neck. It was undoubtedly 『Instant Death』. He lost all strength and became a 『Corpse』, slowly slumping forward until he tumbled from his horse.

Only someone with strengthened kinetic vision would have been able to witness it. From far behind an arrow came flying and pierced the brigand’s neck, ripping it to shreds.

“The hell?!”

The brigand galloping at Andrei with his club raised, couldn’t help but stop his horse after witnessing his partner’s death. He looked behind him, trying to figure out what happened. A cloak fluttered and one cavalryman could be seen. It was the horseman that had been fleeing with Andrei.

He wore subtly ornamented leather armor with a decorative feather on his helmet. The lower half of his face was hidden by a cloth. The brigand was only barely able to make out the young boy’s black eyes. At his waist was a single saber, but what stood out was the vermillion colored bow in his left hand.

The compound bow was slightly larger than what would normally be used on horseback, and it also gave off a strange presence.

The vermillion color stood out against the green grass-covered plain and the sunlight glinted attractively off of the bow’s elegant curve.

One of the brigands shouted, “—Kill him!” and the rest of the dumbfounded brigands quickly regained their senses.

However, it was all too late. The black-eyed boy had already nocked another arrow. In one

breath, he drew his bow and loosed his arrow from atop his galloping horse. Crack! The arrow shot like a silver beam straight for the brigand as he groaned.

The deep sound of hitting flesh resounded as if it were coming from within his core.

The club wielding brigand that was facing off against Andrei was blown off his horse as if he'd been shoved. Sticking out of the left side of his chest was a white feathered arrow. The club wielding brigand fell to the ground with a thud. It had accurately struck his heart with a critical hit. The club wielding brigand could only drop his gaze, dumbfounded by the arrow that pierced his leather armor with ease.

"Shit…!

Muttered the brigand before the last of his HP ran out and he became a 『Corpse』.

"You bastard, what tremendous skill!"

"It's not just his skill, that bow is dangerous!"

Among the restless brigands, one with heavy metal plated leather armor shouted with vigor, "Okay, leave it to me!" as he put up his wooden buckler. Then as he charged in he yelled, "Bring it, you fucking archer–!!"

He repeatedly smacked his buckler with his mace as if he were saying something like 'Just try it!'

"…"

The black-eyed boy slightly narrowed his eyes and drew his bow as far as it could go.

A silver light glinted off the arrow as it flew true with tremendous speed at the brigand with the shield. Even though the arrow was too quick to be seen, the brigand knew it was there because it was coming straight at him. He smiled viciously as he was already prepared to take the shot with his shield.

Crack.

The arrow smashed the shield to pieces, without losing any force it pierced through to the other side. His metal plated leather armor was stabbed through as if it were made of paper.

"Oh…!"

The combined force of the arrow and the charging brigand caused him to be launched like a billiard ball. As his blood sprayed in a wonderful arc through the air, he struck the ground. Without as much as a twitch, it was an 『Instant Death』.

The now rider-less horse continued to gallop on. Its hooves echoed as it continued to gallop past the black-eyed boy.

"…They got James–!"

"Shit, that archer is too much!"

"This isn't good, let's run–!"

Between the limitless power of the bow and its somewhat inhuman wielder, the brigands completely lost their will to fight. They leaned into their horses and began running away at

full speed.

The black-eyed boy brought his horse to a gallop and began to leisurely attack. The brigands ran in random zig-zig patterns in order to avoid being targeted.

But, it was all in vain.

A twang rang out two, three times. The silver of the arrows flashed, and one after another the brigands were shot down. Just like that, three of the brigands were shot to death. However, the last one was a little luckier. Even though he took a direct hit, because it hit his shoulder it wasn't an instant kill. His figure gradually disappeared as he ran on toward the hills.

"…"

The boy stopped his horse on a small hill, not wanting to chase the brigand too far. With an arrow still nocked, he looked around at his surroundings.

To the east lay green, rolling hills as far as the eye could see. Occasionally the sound of the wind rustling the leaves carried over.

To the west was an impressive mountain range so tall that it became slightly hazy. A forest spread across the base of the mountain. Just in front the forest, the small figure of the brigand shot in the shoulder could be seen desperately running away. He continued to get smaller in the keen eyes of the boy as the brigand ran on and on.

The boy remained on guard for another ten seconds or so. After determining that there were no more enemies and no one lying in ambush, he returned to where Andrei waited.

"…"

Andrei knelt beside his dark brown horse, and hung his head. The horse was in pain from the arrow in its rear end.

"…Are you okay?" the boy asked in perfect, fluent English. He laid his bow across his legs and returned the arrow to his quiver.

Andrei snapped his head up and bitterly shouted, "Like hell I'm alright!!" He also spoke English, but his Russian accent slipped in as he had some difficulty pronouncing the 'R'. "Look! Just look at this! It's terrible!" He stood up angrily and made exaggerated gestures toward all the scattered bottles.

The bottles were scattered about the soft grass, perhaps due to the impact, most of them were broken. Hardly any whole bottles could be seen. Most of the blue liquid they once held had since leaked out.

"The 『High Potions』 went to waste! Almost… almost all of them, you know! Even though I got them so cheap! 'Wolvern' isn't even all that far away! Terrible, this is just terrible! Now… now I'm way in the red aren't I…"

While speaking Andrei gradually lost steam until he broke down sobbing and fell back down onto his knees.

Even while the black-eyed boy looked at him pitifully, he shook his head slightly in disappointment.

“…. I even told you not to get greedy. It’s like this because you were greedy and tried to bring the whole lot all at once.”

“But, buuut!”

“At the very least, if you hadn’t overloaded your horse, we could’ve gotten away. Am I wrong?”

“Ngh…”

Andrei had no comeback for any of the facts the boy listed. The one who refused to acknowledge the boy’s warning and forced him to load on a large amount of potions was none other than himself.

“…. Rather, if you had just used your bow from the start, they might’ve retreated! Why didn’t you attack any sooner?!”

Andrei stood up, knowing he was in a bad situation he made exaggerated gestures and tried to change the point of interest.

“Hey, hey, who’s the one being paid to be a bodyguard?”

“Ngh-“

“Think about it, have you ever heard of the client protecting the bodyguard?”

“Gu-“

“You should be grateful that I didn’t just leave you behind in the first place. If I had, I would have easily gotten away without any risk.”

“Gununu-“

After receiving such a counter Andrei groaned with a vexed expression.

He opened his mouth as if to respond, but as he was in no place to argue, he just sank to his knees.

“Seriously, saying that I’m the one that requested a bodyguard. But just how many times have I thought of leaving you? I’m carrying valuables as it is…”

The black-eyed boy muttered to himself while patting the bow on his lap.

“Kuh… shit, Kei, this is your fault! All because you had to request a bodyguard! I thought that was a rare opportunity, but I was wrong to accept it! If I had refused then I could’ve gone on without ever touching these potions! Damn it! Damn it…”

Andrei seemingly spit out the words with resignation as he once again calmed down. His strength seemed to have given out and he fell down with a thud. Then he started quietly playing with the ground with his finger.

He was just throwing a fit. The black-eyed boy named Kei sighed.

While looking far behind them, toward the grand mountain range view, Kei muttered in Japanese, “Not like I care…”

Vermillion - Chapter 1

About twenty years ago there was a revolution in computer science. Information processing techniques took a huge leap forward. With developments in human biology, virtual reality, namely VR, was implemented ten years ago.

Currently, the world is filled with applications with various content for VR. One such application was the Northern Europe developers' VRMMORPG,『Demondal』. It was a realistic middle-ages fantasy type of MMORPG.

The game used the world's most prominent physics engine. All areas were Free PvP, and a player that dies drops all of their current items at the place of death (including their corpse). Players' actions did not unlock different abilities. Typical game elements such as player names, HP bars, so forth and so on, were missing. It felt rather cutting edge.

According to the developing company, "We strived for the utmost limits of a fantastic reality."

The line 『Demondal』proudly draws between itself and other VR games that focused heavily on game elements is its unimpeded VR simulation experience making it practically a real life simulator.

The in-game menu only contained three options:『Logout』,『Call GM』, and『Real World Time』. It should be easily understood just how realistic they were aiming for.

However, VR games that pursue the most realism are sadly, not accepted by everybody. 『Demondal』is a good example of that.

Unlike other games the severity of the system, specifically the combat, item creation, and no passive abilities, was too difficult for a typical person.

All in-game actions are plain, real life actions. Moreover, compared to other games it had a steep learning curve.

『Demondal』's active player count numbers a little over 20,000.

When considering that other online VR games have at least 50,000 active players, the disparity becomes apparent.

However, the 'heroes', the oddballs, the cripples, and other unfortunates who seek out such a severe and real 『World』gather indiscriminately from all corners of the world. They gather in the world's toughest VRMMO, 『Demondal』.

Nogawake Iichi, better known as Kei in 『Demondal』is also one of the hopeless gamers that love that rotten world.

As Kei galloped on his horse he held his bow single-handed and said to Andrei, who was

following him, “…Even so, those guys from earlier sure had a lot of energy.”

It had already been about ten minutes since they repelled the brigands. The surrounding area changed from luscious hills to trees to sparse woods of varying trees. It was proof that they were approaching Kei’s stronghold, “Wolvern”.

They would reach Wolvern in another twenty minutes.

“You’re right…. They were probably separate characters for roleplaying.” Andrei agreed. He sounded a little down, perhaps still depressed from the loss of the potions.

Unlike the sulking Andrei, Andrei’s horse walked lightly after being freed from its heavy load and fully healed by a potion.

Andrei sighed then shook his head as if trying to shake off the gloom and then continued, “At the very least, their coordination wasn’t nooby. That level of coordination takes quite a bit of practice.”

“Yeah, their teamwork was admirable. If their archers had been better, we would’ve been in trouble.”

“Anyhow, after the leader died they lost all coordination.” Andrei then frowned under his scarf and tilted his head slightly in puzzlement. “…You know, they knew about me, but not about you? Are they from a different game?”

The number one for “Ninja” style, and moreover one of the few saber wielders, Andrei was extraordinarily well-known. Kei wasn’t as popular as him, but was a reasonably well-known player regardless.

He would be logged in for so long that people were saying, “Isn’t he just living in this game?” One could say that he may as well have been a cripple. At a glance he was a battle maniac and master of mounted archery. What’s more is that he was one of 『Demondal』’s few known Japanese players.

“No, it was most likely this thing’s fault.” In his left hand Kei held out the splendid vermillion composite bow.

In the world of 『Demondal』 all items a player is carrying are dropped at the place of death. Running into thieves and brigands that are after such drops are an everyday occurrence.

For that reason, most players reinforce cheap practical armor. Players that use high class or even unique items regularly are extremely limited.

Kei was no exception. Both his weapons and his armor were usually slightly inferior to high grade equipment.

His favorite bow was large and especially hard to handle while on horseback, but in return it had good power and range. It was a strange longbow for mounted archers, but it was Kei’s trademark.

However, today’s circumstances were different.

The vermillion composite bow.

A Wyvern’s wing tendon and a branch of an Elder Treant; two extremely valuable materials are used to make it. In 『Demondal』 there is no other bow that can compete with its power.

Kei requested this bow be made by a competent bow craftsman, and it had finally been finished. He had only just retrieved this gem from the seaside town “Kitene”.

Its name was inscribed as 『Dragon Stinger』.

The size was a little large for mounted archery, but it was smaller than what Kei was accustomed to. Using the bow wasn’t a problem for him. Although, the draw strength of the bow was so high that other longbows couldn’t even compare.

Of course, both the power and range were far from normal too.

At the practice range『Dragon Stinger』’s arrow completely pierced through both sides of plate metal armor from 200 meters away.

So logically, within a 200 meter radius, it could even pierce『Dragon Scales』, which boasted the highest defense in the game. Hence the name, 『Dragon Stinger』.

This one of a kind extraordinarily powerful, beautiful vermillion bow would likely overtake the longbow as Kei’s new trademark.

By the way, Kei still had materials left over. If he felt like it, he could make another two of these bows. Even while taking into account that it may be stolen, he could wield it without worry. So that was another reason why 『Dragon Stinger』 was a good bow to use.

“His wooden shield was pretty shabby, but breaking it to pieces and even piercing through his armor was funny. That bow is pretty amazing.”

“Yup, yup.”

It’s not like Kei had made it himself, but he was pleased that Andrei complimented it openly.

“As expected of Jap the Ripper… A suitable weapon for a death god, wouldn’t you agree?”

“…”

At Andrei’s teasing Kei suddenly turned gloomy.

“Jap the Ripper”. Out of Kei’s many nicknames it was most likely the best known.

The nickname stemmed from the famous murderer Jack the Ripper. Those who fought with Kei rarely survived, thus the name was given to him.

Kei was able to use powerful longbows from horseback with ease. He was leagues above other players in ability. Gauging the wind was a talent of his. His accuracy was unparalleled. Second-rate armor couldn’t stop his arrows, assuring his prey would die.

Thus, he became known as “Jap the Ripper”.

He happened to be Japanese, so they changed it from Jack the Ripper to Jap the Ripper.

No one can say for sure who started it, but because of its simplicity it spread like wildfire,

erasing his first nicknames like “Stinger”, “Large Archer”, and others. More recently he was starting to be called, “The Jap”. The ones calling him so didn’t mean it in a bad waythat much, but as a Japanese person being called “Jap” over and over didn’t feel very good.

“…I wish I’d have a different nickname already,” Kei murmured a distant wish.

“Yeahhh. A new nickname would be nice.”

Andrei somewhat nonchalantly agreed from behind with his arms folded.

Truthfully, since Kei got his hands on 『Dragon Stinger』 the fatality rate of those who fought with him would increase ever more.

If he walked around with this bow regularly, the number of people aiming to steal from him would also rise. In other words, the number of victims will continue to rise.

Andrei secretly thought to himself, Won’t the Ripper nickname just spread even further?

Another ten minutes passed as they galloped on. After passing through the sparse woods they followed a small river upstream.

Directly in front of them, between the tall bare cliff sides lay the entrance to a gorge. The gorge was known as “Wolvern Valley”.

It was a very convenient road that led toward the player-made village “Wolvern”. If they continued through the valley and up the path along the cliff, they should reach the village in a matter of minutes, except–

“…Fog?”

Kei knitted his brow in suspicion and pulled on the reins to stop his horse.

Fog.

The road that stretched from the gorge entrance to the other end faded completely into the white fog. The fog was thick as if milk mixed with the air, blocking their view.

Kei muttered, “…Something feels off.”

“Yeah. The weather isn’t bad,” responded Andrei, looking up at the clear sky.

In the realistic 『Demondal』, the weather is also reproduced. The phenomenon known as fog isn’t all that uncommon. But becausethe game is so realistic, it was incomprehensible as to why there would be fog now.

Andrei faced Kei and suggested, “… 『Illusionary Fog』?”

Kei denied the idea with a shake of his head. “No, I don’t think so. Think about our magic resistance.”

“…It shouldn’t be this thick for us, huh.”

“Yeah, at the very least, this can’t be player-made. My sixth sense isn’t reacting either,” said Kei while carefully observing their surroundings.

『Sixth Sense』. One of the few game elements in the realistic 『Demondal』. To the Japanese, describing it as “bloodlust” would make it the easiest to understand. Simply put, it is a system where he would get the “chills” if he felt someone intending to attack him.

General illusions that don’t cause any real harm are also considered “attacks”.

“If your sixth sense isn’t reacting… then this isn’t a magician’s doing.”

Andrei brought his hand to his chin and hummed in thought.

Putting aside Kei fighting from long distances, he exceled at sensing bloodlust through 『Passive Sense』 as well as suppressing his own bloodlust through 『Stealth Sense』.

Even without the god-like passive ability to sense an attack from even the slightest bit of bloodlust, he could generally deal with surprise attacks. In return for being overly sensitive to bloodlust, it was hard to handle stimulating free-for-alls.

In any case, even Kei didn’t feel any bloodlust coming from the fog.

“Well, if it’s a contract with something other than a fairy then it’s a different story…. For argument’s sake, if it were a spell with no menace nor hostility then even I wouldn’t be able to feel it.” Kei drew an arrow from his quiver as he asked, “Do you feel anything, Andrei?”

“Nope. You know that I’m no good with passives. If you don’t understand it then there’s no way I would.”

Andrei drew his saber from the scabbard on his back and shrugged his shoulders.

Other than using a saber for hand-to-hand combat, Andrei was a ninja who also excelled at sabotage, ambushes, and the like. His 『Offensive Sense』 which overwhelms his opponent with bloodlust is the extreme opposite of its bloodlust suppressing friend, 『Stealth Sense』.

Andrei who mixes up the “Active” and “Stealth” abilities alongside his sword, toys with his enemies in an ever-changing manner. He could cut through the very root of the battle’s rhythm and dominate the atmosphere.

But because this fighting style takes the initiative, Andrei didn’t have many opportunities to use “Passives”. Furthermore, his ability to sense bloodlust is limited to meager levels.

Meaning, it’s only for top-class players. His ability at least wasn’t comparable to that of Kei’s.

“But, even so, I get that this fog is blatantly suspicious.”

“Agreed. What should we do about it?”

As far as Kei knew, there hasn’t been any occurrence of fog in Wolvern Valley before. Including days with poor weather.

Although there have been events, items, new monsters or small story related updates that have been added without prior notification.

They thought that this fog might also part of something new.

“…Taking a detour would be the safest choice.”

Andrei said in an incredulous voice, “It’ll take another 30 minutes if we do, you know?”

The only other way to get to Wolvern would be to go around the cliff and then climb up the steep mountain road.

“Then let’s just charge through?”

“Kei… Why do you gotta be so extreme?”

“How many adventures have you been on? You’re saying that even though you want to do it?”

“Heh, pretty much. I’ve got nothing to fear now that I’ve lost most of my potions!”

Andrei proudly stuck his chest out masochistically, but tilted his head and said, “But is it all right? In the worst case, that bow…”

“Of course I don’t want to lose it, but I have the materials for another. Besides, the next time something bad happens I’m going to leave you behind and run.”

“You ass,” joked Andrei as he raised his saber. A smile floated onto Kei’s face and he pretended to run away on his horse.

“Well, let’s check it out a little, partner.”

“Let’s.”

The two entered the fog with smiles.

Vermillion - Chapter 2

Inside the Fog

It was a milky white world as far as they could see.

“It’s so thick…”

While slowly moving forward on their horses, Kei had his bow readied to fire an arrow at any given time. The atmosphere around them was filled with tension.

Thanks to the sunlight pouring down from overhead it wasn’t dark, but the world around them grew hazy. Things didn’t look too good.

It was difficult to see about five meters ahead of them, and they could hardly see anything ten meters away. The silhouettes of many trees appeared suddenly from the milky white veil startling Kei repeatedly.

Each and every particle looked detailed to the point of illusion. Even their heads felt dizzy due to the hazy world. It was an unpleasant sensation.

“Andrei, you following?”

“Yup. I lose you sometimes though.”

“…Don’t get lost.”

“I’ll be careful. That would be a pain anyway.”

Is he really okay? Kei thought and looked toward Andrei who followed closely behind him. Andrei looked at the surrounding area with interest as he swayed atop his horse with his saber bumping against his shoulder.

“This fog is something else, ain’t it? I’ve never seen anything like this, even in reality.”

“…Is fog common in your country?”

“Uhhh… No. Not much fog, but it’s always snowing instead.”

“Russia, right?”

“Yeah, I’m in Siberia.”

“Huh, Siberia… sounds cold.”

“Our winter hits minus 30 Celsius on a good day.”

“No thanks. I’m no good with the cold.”

They stopped talking for a moment.

“…Think it’s a spell after all? It feels like it’s too thick to be natural.”

“Yeaahh. But even if a mob used a spell, it would have hostility, right? In that case, then your 『Sixth Sense』 should react.”

“Which means, it has no threat… No, accounting for our magic resistance, this density shouldn’t have zero threat.”

“It could be real fog rather than 『Illusionary』 too, ya know?”

“…If so, then it’d have to be a pretty high ranking spirit. It’d be a good deal if we made a contract with it… But fighting with just the two of us doesn’t sound very appealing.”

“…I hope it’s not an aggressive type.”

Andrei took up a pose of hopelessness. Suddenly, his face stiffened with shock and he pulled out a throwing knife from behind him with his left hand.

“…”

“What’s up, Andrei?”

In a flash Kei felt Andrei’s sharp bloodlust and he stopped his horse, readying his bow as he looked for the cause.

Andrei wore a baffled expression while holding the throwing knife in his left hand. He sighed as he said, “…I heard a voice.”

“…A voice?” Kei frowned unintentionally.

Kei’s ears weren’t as good as eyes with the『Enhanced Sight』 crest etched in them both, but as an avatar with the highest possible stats they were remarkably sensitive.

But he didn’t hear any voices.

“…What… what was that just now…”

“…Calm down. Something feels off.”

Like a broken machine, Andrei looked around restlessly. The inexplicably nervous Kei was perplexed at the words he himself had spoken.

Something feels off—

He wanted to push away such ridiculousness with a laugh.

There certainly was the system of getting the chills, 『Sixth Sense』, in 『Demondal』, but it only reproduces a goose-bumpy kind of feel.

It shouldn’t have actually made him feel uneasy. It shouldn’t have directly affected his emotions.

The fact is, right now Kei was struck by the feeling of something unbeknownst to him crawling up from below his feet.

“…Andrei, I didn’t hear any voices.”

“That’s impossible! There… It’s there again!”

With a slightly panicked expression, Andrei said in a shrill voice, “You can hear it too,

can’t you?!”

“…No, I don’t hear anything.”

He truly didn’t hear anything. However, clearly this wasn’t the case for Andrei.

“Liar! Why are you lying?!”

“I’m not, just calm down.”

“Why can’t you hear it?! There, aga—”

Suddenly, as Andrei was trying to speak, his eyes opened wide and he went stiff.

“…”

“…Andrei?”

“…Who’s there?!”

Andrei looked around with his saber raised and screamed, “Who’s there?! Where are you?!”

“Andrei!”

“Who?! Why, why—“ With an expression filled with fear Andrei screamed, “—why the hell do you know my name?!”

“…What?” The heck is this guy talking about, thought Kei for a moment.

“…Andrei, just calm down would y—“

Andrei spun and faced Kei.

At that moment, a bead of cold sweat ran down Kei’s back.

Andrei was looking straight through him.

His eyes were clearly not focused on Kei. Andrei’s face was as white as a ghost, and he was as expressionless as a noh mask[1]. Having a top game’s avatar had no effect on the very real chill that ran down Kei’s back as if something repulsive were there.

“…”

Without a word, Andrei raised his left hand overhead. The throwing knife glinted.

Kei had the illusion that Andrei’s black clothes swelled up, “Wa—, hold up a sec.”

His left arm blurred.

Kei felt Andrei’s sharp bloodlust hit him like a knife. In a panic Kei stooped over. The knife whistled as it cut through the air, the silver knife barely grazing his head.

“Hey! Quit screwin’ around, Andrei!!”

He unintentionally yelled angrily, but Andrei paid no heed and kept looking around suspiciously.

“Fuck, where. The hell did he g— aahhhh, ah, ah, ah, disappear, disappear.”

While he seemed to be muttering incoherently, he sat on his horse and hugged his arms to his chest, perhaps because the cold chilled him. His body shivered lightly like someone with hypothermia.

At the height of Kei's worry he nimbly slipped off of his saddle and tried to approach Andrei.

At that exact moment, Andrei suddenly stopped shivering and pulled another throwing knife from behind his back.

Here it comes, Kei thought, preparing himself for the hit. But Andrei turned the complete opposite way.

"There!"

Andrei threw the knife and it whistled through the air.

Of course a knife that is thrown at nothing wouldn't hit anything. It disappeared into the milky-white veil.

Normally, one would expect to hear the knife stick into the ground, or bounce off of the cliff side, or some sort of noise. But, the world inside the fog was eerily quiet.

"Again, again, it's gone…"

Andrei hung his head and looked like he was about to cry.

Kei sympathized with him, and then in the midst of this ridiculous situation he remembered his anger. Unable to hold back, he mustered his strength and shouted from his diaphragm, "Hey, Andrei! Get it together!!"

Startled by the voice Andrei raised his head.

"…Kei!!"

Andrei shouted back, but he turned around.

—There's no way that Kei was over that way.

"Kei! Where did you go?!"

Andrei heaved a somewhat relieved sigh.

"Seriously, scaring me like that…"

"Yeah, that's right. I heard some strange voice earlier."

"No, it wasn't a hallucination. It really was real."

"Forget about that, where did you go? I got pretty scared, ya know?"

"Huh? You were here the whole time? Liar. There's no way you were here."

Andrei laughed loudly.

—This isn’t a joke.

“Hey… Hey!! Andrei!!!”

The sight of Andrei enjoying a conversation with only himself made Kei’s hair stand on end.

“Just who are you talking to?!”

Andrei whipped around and looked his way. Andrei’s eyes weren’t focused.

“…Hey, did you hear that voice just now?”

Andrei looked around. “Hey, Kei… Kei?”

Andrei turned around again and let out a confused, “Huh?”

“Hey, where the hell did you go this time, Kei! Would you quit screwing around?!”

“You’re the one that’s screwing around! I’m right here!”

“…! Over there!”

While looking in the wrong direction Andrei gripped the reins and spurred his horse. The horse whinnied and took off running.

“Keiiii! Waaiit!”

“No! That isn’t me! Stop, Andrei!!” Kei screamed desperately, “Andrei!!!”

The fog engulfed Andrei.

Kei could still hear the sound of hooves moving farther and farther away— and then they were gone.

“…”

Kei could only stand dumbfounded and alone.

“…!”

After a few seconds, or maybe longer, he suddenly regained his senses.

I have to go after him, he thought.

However, it felt wrong. In this strange, unknown situation Kei wanted to log out or change to a different character.

But, Andrei would never leave Kei in this kind of situation.

Kei had a hunch that something was definitely wrong.

“Shit, that idiot.”

While cursing Andrei for causing so much trouble, Kei pulled the reins of his horse and tried to get on.

“…?”

But the reins didn’t budge.

Kei tilted his head and followed the reins up with his eyes.

“…Mikazuki? What’s wrong?”

While saying its name, Kei felt something was off and turned to face his favorite horse.

Still gripping the reins Kei looked at the horse’s— Mikazuki’s face. Mikazuki looked like it had been stuffed, it didn’t so much as twitch.

“…Heey, Mikazuki?”

Kei waved his hand in front of Mikazuki’s face. Usually, a pet would follow its owner’s movements by moving either its eyes or head. However, Mikazuki kept staring perfectly straight without a hint of movement.

“…What’s going on?”

Maybe it’s a bug? Kei sighed. I should have logged off after all.

I really want to get out of here—

“Bururu.”

Just as he was thinking such things, Mikazuki snorted and shook its head, almost like a computer restarting because of an error.

“Oh, you’re back. Good.”

“Bururu, bururu.” Ignoring Kei as he sighed in relief, Mikazuki snorted.

“Bururu, bururu, bururururu.”

Kei realized something was wrong right away.

“Bururururu, bururururururu.”

Mikazuki shook its head up and down as it continued to snort.

“Bururururururururururururururururu—”

The shaking got so violent toward the end that it blurred as if it were a broken toy. Its neighing sounded like the roar of an engine.

“…Mi-Mikazuki?”

Kei timidly reached his hand out to the blur of a head.

Just before Kei’s hand reached its head, Mikazuki suddenly stopped shaking.

“…”

Mikazuki stared directly at Kei and it opened its mouth, “Mi–Ka–Zu–Ki–I.”

Kei’s deep voice cracked, “What?!”

Startled, he reflexively tried to jump backwards, but tripped over himself and fell on his butt.

“…”

It didn’t make sense. Still dumbfounded, Kei’s mouth was hanging opening like an idiot.

He couldn’t even speak.

Normally, pets don’t talk.

That much is a given. It’s a horse after all.

It wouldn’t speak, it couldn’t speak.

At least, that’s how it should have been.

“…”

Directly across from him, Mikazuki’s seemingly lifeless head fixed its eyes on Kei.

Its beady, marble-like eyes continued to stare at Kei without moving. Kei’s head started to spin. It felt like the inside of his mouth was drying up. That delusion assaulted Kei.

“…Bururu.” Just how much time had passed?

Once again, Mikazuki snorted and suddenly averted its gaze. Just like that it turned and left its owner, Kei, and galloped into the fog.

The sound of hooves gradually faded away into the distance until eventually, Kei could no longer hear them.

Silence.

“…”

Taken aback Kei was left all alone.

A loud noise escaped his throat.

Kei hoarsely gasped for breath. He only realized just now that he’d been holding his breath.

For a little while he just sat there and took shallow breaths.

In the tranquil world of fog, Kei’s gasping and wheezing echoed, faded, and then disappeared.

“…Calm down… Calm down, calm down…”

He muttered quietly to himself.

Kei changed positions to sit cross-legged, and with his hand on his chest he took slow, deep breaths.

Finally, when his heartbeat slowed down he let out a big sigh. Kei pressed his finger tips to his brows like he was trying to fight a headache.

He meditated for a few seconds.

“…Calm.”

Kei decided to run away from this situation. It didn’t feel right, it was just too much.

With a pale face, Kei tried to open the menu window through the game’s mental interface.

If this were the same as always he wouldn’t put much thought into it and it would execute. But this time it didn’t work.

However many times he tried to open it, the window just wouldn’t pop up.

“…Why won’t it pop up?” He whispered.

If I can’t log out… Then −

Suddenly, such thoughts flooded his head.

A bead of cold sweat trickled down his back.

No one else was here.

He was all alone in the fog.

His skin gradually grew hot, but his core grew cold.

“…Shit. Why won’t this just work.” While he muttered irritably he shook his head and tried the mental interface. Failed. Again. Failed. Again.

Failed.

“…Argh!!”

Just as his frustration and irritation was about to reach the breaking point, a semi-transparent window silently appeared before his eyes.

Like always the Real World Time, GM Call, and Logout options all appeared on the sterile white window.

He tried moving the cursor with his eyes, and as if all the irregularities up until now had been a lie, the menu showed full functionality.

It was as if everything was normal.

“…Thank god.”

After seeing it in working order, Kei sighed in relief.

Truthfully, the situation was entirely too weird. Maybe I got mixed up in some psychic phenomenon.

These foolish feelings swelled up inside him, it couldn’t be helped.

“…Even though this is just a game.”

Putting up a strong front, Kei let out a snort of amusement as he reached out and pushed the 『Logout』 button.

At that exact moment a voice came from right behind him, “No-Ka-Wa Ke-I-I-Chi.”

The deep voice cracked and carried such intense bloodlust that it would make one’s stomach churn.

“!??”

Why his real name? The ominous voice? The tremendous bloodlust? Without understanding what was going on, Kei rolled to an upright position and kicked the ground hard to gain some distance. As he turned around he readied his bow, nocked an arrow, and drew back the bowstring.

But then he froze.

Somebody was there.

Its skin was practically as pale as that of a corpse.

For some reason, it was completely naked. No, could it be called naked if it had no genitals? Its body was smooth almost like an alien.

There wasn’t a single hair on its head. Even though it had a humanoid body, calling it human would be a stretch.

It lacked any sort of facial features.

The only feature was the two black holes where its eyes should have been.

“__“

For just a moment when his thoughts went blank, a genuine question ran through Kei’s mind,

The hell is with this guy?

Just then, the place where the humanoid’s mouth should have been suddenly ripped open, “Yo-N-Ta.”

Kei’s head started to spin.

He fell to his knees with a thump.

Kei lost consciousness.

Vermillion - Chapter 3

Kei absentmindedly dreamed.
A dream of playing outside with a friend from his childhood.
It looked innocent and fun.
Maybe it was tag. His younger self ran around.
Just like sand it smoothly melted away until it disappeared.

A white room.
From the window he could see a bird flapping away with outstretched wings.
He merely followed the bird’s flight in the clear sky with his eyes.
Atop the clean bed, he laid motionless. Entirely motionless.
He gently closed his eyes.

Everything was dyed blue.
The world ebbed and surged with a light blue hue.
It wasn’t hard to breathe.
That’s just how things were.
He wasn’t even scared.
He was sinking. Sinking into himself.
Deeper and deeper—

— He continued walking for what felt like a while.
Directly in front of him was a mirror.
A mirror that didn’t reflect anything.
No, he could see something if he focused his eyes.

Black hair and black eyes rose to the surface.

Subtly ornamented leather armor.

A feathered headpiece.

A single saber next to a quiver on someone’s hip.

And a vermillion bow in his left hand.

“…It’s me.”

His murmured words resonated clearly.

As soon as he recognized it, the form became clear.

Kei.

So he had once named himself.

Up to now, his two selves lived alongside one another.

“…My… body.”

He made a fist and squeezed.

His hand steadily unclenching and relaxing. The blood coursing through his veins. The tingling of his nerves to all his extremities.

He firmly felt it all.

Before he knew it, the mirror disappeared before his eyes.

In its place was a long path stretching on.

Somehow his surroundings felt lively.

A horse prancing about energetically.

A girl wearing a robe of feathers.

It was almost like a revolving lantern.

The illusions of shadows whispered to no one in particular, “Let’s go.”

And Kei took the first step forward.

Vermillion - Chapter 4

Andrei

“—Kei! Keii!”

Someone was yelling.

“Get up! Hey, Kei! Get up already!”

Kei’s ears complained about the incessant noise as he lolled from the person shaking him.

Kei remembered this kind of discomfort.

It was nostalgic somehow.

It felt similar to when he was younger and got very seasick from riding on a ship.

“…Knock it off, don’t shake me.”

While moaning and fighting off the nausea he opened his eyes a little.

“You’re awake!”

The world he was thrust into was dyed orange; it was probably the sunset colored sky. Then there was the person worriedly looking down on him; a black shadow.

Blonde hair and blue eyes. A black iron head guard and black clothes that enshrouded the figure.

It was a “Ninja”.

“…Where are we?”

Realizing that he was lying down on his back Kei slowly sat up. He looked around. The grassy plains were dyed vermillion.

Turning around, a huge rugged, rocky mountain stood towering above the surroundings.

Putting aside the grassy plains, Kei had no recollection of this mountain.

“…Where the heck is this?” Kei muttered quietly, his thoughts still hazy as if he’d just woken up in the morning.

“The hell if I know!” With a thick Russian accent the ninja replied in English, “Before I realized it I was here… B-but look at this! This! It shouldn’t be like this!”

The ninja spoke as he pulled out the grass right at his feet and showed Kei. The dirt clinging to the roots broke off in little bits and fell to the ground.

“…What the?”

No way.

Kei’s absentminded expression suddenly became alert. Wide-eyed in surprise, Kei also reached out for the grass in front of him.

He carelessly ripped it up.

He could feel the light tearing of the fibers on his fingertips. The smell of grass mixed with dirt distinctly filled his nose. Kei tried licking the grass juices stuck to his fingers.

Of course, it was bitter.

“…This can’t be.”

The grass, ripped to pieces in his hand, didn’t even disappear.

His five senses all conveyed its existence.

Even each individual speck of dirt could be made out.

“See?! Strange, right?!” The ninja wore a desperate expression as he pressed Kei a little hard for an answer.

“Y-yeah.” Kei nodded.

Even though 『Demondal』 boasted the world’s fastest physics engine, there were substantial restrictions on interactions with game objects such as dirt and plants.

That was because if the system tried to calculate the movements of all the small pieces, then data processing would become too much of a burden and would fall behind.

Therefore, only specific items within the game are exceptions. Dirt and plants are set as 『Non-Interactable Objects』 which are also known as 『Indestructible Objects』.

—At least, they should have been.

What happened to that?

Right now, the ripped up pieces of grass in Kei’s hand was certainly there.

Some of the grass in his palm blew away with the plain’s breeze.

The sound of grass rustling came with the earthy smell of grass and dirt.

The grass twirled and danced in the wind. Dumbfounded, Kei just followed it with his eyes.

He raised his gaze to the deep-red dyed rocky mountain. The rock face seemed to twinkle here and there. Some of the exposed minerals reflected the light of the setting sun.

Looking up further, the evening sky hung overhead.

The slowly changing clouds couldn’t have been any reused graphics.

Somehow it had become very real.

More overwhelmingly real than ever before.

It was too overwhelming, there was too much to take in.

—Yes, it was almost like it was…

“Reality…”

No way, he denied that explanation right off the bat.

If this was reality… Then just what was this body?

This bracer and leather armor and this saber as well. Even the vermillion bow at his feet; all of it belonged to “Kei”.

The ninja’s voice shook as he said, “…The menu screen won’t come up. No matter how many times I try it.” He clenched his fists like he was trying to endure something unpleasant and stared at the ground.
“…”

Bewildered, Kei looked at the ninja.

It was an important piece of information that the menu wouldn’t appear. But, the person covered in black clothes only added to Kei’s confusion.

“…? W-what’s wrong, Kei?”

The ninja became aware of Kei’s silent, cold gaze as Kei observed him as one would a stranger.

“Um, you know—” Kei tried to speak but then kept quiet.

He hesitated for a short while.

“…The heck, what’s wrong?”

“U-uum.”

Resolving himself Kei asked, “Who… are you?”

“…Hah?”

What in the world is this guy talking about, thought the ninja.

Taken aback, the ninja said obliviously, “—Hey, did the shock knock something loose in your head? Gimme a break, Kei! It’s not like I don’t understand though.”

He sure got me, was written all over the ninja’s face. He lightly tapped his forehead and said, “Andrei! Andrei the Ninja! …Don’t tell me you forgot or something?”

Like a puppy abandoned on a rainy day Andrei, filled with anxiety, faced Kei.

Andrei.

That was the answer he was expecting.

Well, that much is to be expected.

That’s not it. That’s not what I really meant, Kei thought and knitted his brow.

To begin with, calling him “Kei” so casually, furthermore, covered entirely in black and a sabre on his back; only one person that Kei knew fit the description.

Rather, out of all the 『Demondal』 players only one person fits the description.

But, even so.

The ninja in front of him wasn’t the “Andrei” that he knew.

There was just one difference between them.

“…Okay, ‘Andrei’.”

Kei raised his head and sternly looked directly at him.

“W-what is it?”

“Well, I don’t want you to get the wrong impression.”

“Sure.”

“There’s just one thing that I want to ask.”

“…What is it?”

“This is just for reassurance, you know? That is…”

“…”

“It’s a little hard to say…”

“…Quit beating around the bush, spit it out!”

It wasn’t like Kei to be so indirect or to say “Andrei” the way he did.

Still bewildered Kei nervously asked, “…Why are you… a girl?”

“…Huh?” She stupidly spoke for the second time. “Andrei” froze up.

“…What are you talking about?”

“No, well, you see…”

Following where Kei pointed “Andrei” looked down.

It was her chest.

Or more accurately—the bulges on her chest.

A strange sounding, “…Wha?” escaped. “Andrei’s” eye’s widened. “Eh? Why? Eh?”

Sort of timidly, “Andrei” grabbed her own respectable chest.

Munyu, munyu[1].

“…I-I have boobs,” she muttered in a daze. And then with a small gasp she looked like she just realized something. Just like that she reached her hand between her legs.

Mozo, mozo[2].

“…I-it’s not there.” Something. Something was there. “…Why?”

“How should I know?”

The cosplaying ninja was a girl.

Vermillion - Chapter 5

5. Antique

A single rocky mountain towered over the grassy plains. In its shade a young boy and girl talked with one another.

“Our situation, huh,” Aileen muttered while she traced her pink lips with the tip of her finger.

“It’s a unique situation so I can’t really say much, but I can think of a couple reasons, I think.”

“Okay, go ahead. I’ll do you the honor of listening.”

“Can it.”

It seemed like Aileen had regained ‘Andrei’s’ energy once more.

It was enough for Kei. Smiling, he held up one finger, “Well, it isn’t anything that special. Firstly, we are still players inside 『Demondal』.” He held up a second finger, “And secondly, for some reason we were thrown out of the game and are now in a different place.”

“Well, that sounds about right.”

“See? Nothing special. But that’s as far as my imagination can go.”

“Really?” She chuckled smugly, “I happen to know a third possibility.”

“Oh? Speak if you so desire.”

Aileen smirked knowingly and held up three fingers. “Third. I fell asleep while playing 『Demondal』 and all of this is just a dream.”

“…I see. It’s possible, but an unexpectedly straightforward idea.”

“Hey, what do you mean by unexpected?!”

Kei nodded while going, “Hm, hm.”

Aileen looked a little upset, but didn’t actually seem to mind it much.

It was possible that it was all just a dream.

With the sensation of the light and warmth of the fire, a thought crossed his mind. Have I ever felt a dream this real?

But compared to the second possibility that he brought up, hers was much more plausible.

To test whether or not it was really a dream, Kei relied on a classic method.

“Yah!”

“…What are you doing?”

“Am’t hyou tell? I’m pimching mai heek. (Can’t you tell? I’m pinching my cheek.)”

He used all his might. This was the true power of his high strength.

“…Hm. That really hurt. But I didn’t wake up, therefor this is not a dream. Q.E.D.[1]”

He moved his hand from his bright red right cheek and wore a very serious look as he said, “…At the very least, this isn’t my dream. That was already made clear though, huh.”

Amazed, Aileen concluded, If this is a dream then it wouldn’t have hurt, she thought regrettably and drew a throwing knife from behind her back.

Kei asked in a surprised voice, “Woah, you’re going to use a knife?”

Aileen methodically rolled up her sleeve, as if she were going to inject a needle.

“Well. A long time ago I pinched my cheeks in a dream and still didn’t wake up. If I don’t at least go this far, we may never know.”

“No, no, no, if you’re worried about power then I can do it for you. It hurts you know?”

Looking at the bruise forming on Kei’s right cheek, she quietly refused, “…No, it’s fine. I’ll handle this.” She muttered meekly, “Besides, getting hurt again…” and moved to push the knife into the inside of her arm. But…

“What’s wrong?”

She just motionlessly stared at her arm. “It’s… it’s nothing.”

She didn’t look like she was afraid, but she gently unrolled her sleeve and instead removed her left-hand glove and immediately let the knife creep across her palm.

“…”

“…So?”

“It seriously hurts. It’s even bleeding.” Drip, drip. Red drops fell from Aileen’s hand. “Well now, aren’t we in trouble, Kei? This means that it’s impossible for this to be a dream.”

“Well, I did think that this probably wasn’t a dream in the first place… That aside, are you okay? You cut yourself pretty deep.”

“Y-yeah… Honestly, it cut my skin easier than expected. It’s probably a good thing I didn’t cut my arm instead.”

The cut on Aileen’s palm was several centimeters long. It hurt just looking at the straight cut ooze blood.

“Wait a second, I should have some bandages somewhere.”

“It’s all right. I want to try a potion.”

Kei reached toward the bag that hung at his hip, but Aileen stopped him and faced the darkness behind the rock and clicked her tongue.

In the shadow of the large egg-shaped rock two horses were laying down on the soft grass.

They were Kei’s horse, “Mikazuki” and Aileen’s horse, “Sasuke”.

Sasuke heard Aileen clicking her tongue and raised its head as if saying, ‘You called?’ and looked at her with its cute, round eyes.

When Aileen woke up in the plains, Sasuke was supposedly laying down and leisurely grazing. After a little she realized that it was just her and her horse in the plains. Kei was nowhere to be seen. At first, she was quite shocked, but Mikazuki came gallantly cantering toward her before apparently guiding her to the rocky mountain where Kei lay unconscious.

In a way, Kei and Aileen owed Mikazuki a heavy debt. But the person(?)[2] himself seemed to practically not care and left it at that. Even now, he continued to munch on the grass without even acknowledging Aileen.

Aileen met Sasuke halfway and pulled a High Potion out of the leather bag attached to its saddle.

“Now, let’s see how this goes shall we? If it were a game then I should feel bubbly and be healed in an instant…”

Aileen returned to the campfire and sat down on top of the flat rock again before skillfully pulling out the cork one-handed. She gently tipped the bottle over her palm. Rather intrigued, Kei came over to watch.

A viscous light blue liquid trickled onto the wound. Then—

Tsssss!! It sounded like meat sizzling after being thrown onto a hot stove. The wound began to foam.

“Vonya—!!!”

Aileen jumped up and made a weird sound, “Vonya—!!!” The potion flew out of her hand, and Kei caught it in an instant. It was missing the stopper so a little of the liquid spilled out. “AHH—! ~~~!!!”

Her screams strained her voice. When she finished she silently held down her wounded hand with the other in agony. The level of her pain was extremely abnormal.

Kei got up and walked over to her, “Hey, you okay?” He hesitated for a moment before slowly rubbing her back.

It looked extremely painful when Aileen cut her hand with the knife, but part of it may have been his imagination. The way the potion bubbled on the wound closely resembled disinfecting something with hydrogen peroxide. The in-game potions that Kei knew would make a nice and refreshing sound when applied and the wound would be healed.

Ten or so seconds passed.

Cold sweat ran down Aileen’s back and she was breathing hard. Kei rubbed her back and asked, “…Have you calmed down?”

“…Yeah.”

“So, what did it feel like?”

“Awful. It hurt like hell.”

“Anyone could see that. I’m asking about the wound.”

“O-oh.”

She timidly opened her hand. “It’s healed, but…”

“…There’s still a scar.”

“Yeah…”

The wound had closed, but a white line stood out on the new skin.

When one hears “potion”, what comes to mind is a complete recovery without any scars being left behind.

The atmosphere around them was very delicate.

“…Well, it’s not too bad. Your hand is better, right? It doesn’t even stand out much.”

“Y-you’re right.”

“It doesn’t still hurt, does it?”

“No, it feels like the skin is stretching a little, but it’s not a problem… I suppose I cut a little too deep,” Aileen grumbled quietly as she clenched and opened her left hand repeatedly.

Leaving her side, Kei sat down on the opposite side of the fire again and curiously looked over the potion in his hand.

“…I wonder what would happen if someone drank this.”

“It’d recover their stamina,” she gave an anticlimactic reply to Kei’s muttering, “… Probably.”

“…”

“Don’t look at me like I’ll do it!”

“Aileen. You’re a doer, I believe in you.”

“I’m no guinea pig!”

“Che.”

“No, not ‘Che’! Enough with the human experiments!”

Kei sighed audibly, “What a spineless person…”

“I’ve already done my part, now it’s your turn!”

While she was justified saying something like, ‘You should be the one to test it,’ Kei took a sip of the “poison”.

“…”

He only drank a little of the potion, but made a bitter face. Aileen looked somewhat excited and asked, “How is it?”

“Hm… Honestly, I can’t tell if I feel any different. My body feels somewhat warmer, particularly my hands and feet. Also, my butt hurt from sitting on the rock, but it’s more comfortable now. It might have even done something for my lower back pain or stiff shoulders.”

“Is this some sort of old man’s review on an herbal remedy?! No, it’s not! Well, that part is important too, but…! The taste, what does it taste like?!”

“…It’s a lot like the licorice samples from old VR shops. Aside from the sweetness, I think if mint and ginger were mashed together then it would taste like this? Also, it’s a little bitter. I don’t know why, but for some reason it’s sort of carbonated. It was bubbly the moment it touched my tongue. What’s going on with this thing being both carbonated

and thick?”

“Just hearing about it makes it seem bad.”

“Yeah. It tastes bad. Awfully bad.”

Moreover, it was the type that left a long lasting bad aftertaste in the back of his mouth. Still wearing a bitter expression, Kei replaced the stopper on the potion bottle.

Aileen trembled with fear and prepared herself, but Kei’s ‘Why don’t you try it?’ never came. The potion was so bad that he didn’t even feel like teasing her.

Kei played with the potion bottle and slowly began to speak, “…Now then, Aileen.”

Aileen sensed the change in atmosphere and let out a small sigh. “…Are we finished with messing around now?”

“Yeah. Sadly, we should take this seriously or it could be bad.”

It had become entirely dark out. Kei looked up at the night sky with a serious expression.”

“Aileen. I just realized it, but I found an important clue as to where we are.”

“Since when? Well, what is it?”

“It’s that,” Kei indicated above him. “『Hasuniiru』, 『Waadona』, 『Niruda』,” as if he was tracing the sky he moved his finger along, “『Domina』, 『Kashinaato』, and lastly『Iarishin』.”

They seemed to be names of some kind.

Aileen tilted her head slightly, “…What are you talking about?”

Kei gave a clear and concise reply, “The stars.” He looked into the far off distance, at the countless twinkling stars and planets and elaborated, “The constellations… the positions

of the stars are exactly how they were in 『Demondal』.”

Aileen reflexively looked up at the night sky. But even if she looked at the entire star filled sky, it was just a “starry sky”. She had absolutely no clue what the differences were between the starry skies in 『Demondal』 and Earth.

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. That green star over there is called 『Hasuniiru』. It’s the center of the『Great Sword』constellation. The red star next to it, 『Waadona』, and the orange stars around it form the 『Mysterious Talisman』 constellation. 『Niruda』, the blue star over there, forms the ‘Wand of Protection’ constellation if you connect it in a straight line with the other–”

“Yes, yes, I get it. Enough of it… But why do you know so much about it? I haven’t seen anything about constellations on the official forums or even the wikis.”

While Aileen might be saying that, she may have just overlooked it because it didn’t really interest her. She focused on the starry sky.

“That’s to be expected. I only heard about it from a hidden quest. I probably don’t know as much about the constellations or the reasons behind them–in other words ‘Astrology’, as the magicians do.”

“‘Astrology’? Rather, what’s up with the hidden quest?”

“You know the woods just north of 『Dariya Prairie』 near 『Urvan』, right? On the far side of the woods an old woman NPC lives in a small cabin. If you cure her lower back pains with either a potion or medicinal herbs, she teaches you about astrology as thanks. In actuality, it seems like events and weather are linked to the stars. In the game, my weather predictions were fairly accurate.”

“What!!”

Thinking back, Kei’s weather forecasts were usually right. She thought that he surely predicted it based off the direction the wind was blowing and the clouds. To think that the stars held such a secret.

“How cruel of you, Kei! Why didn’t you tell me about this?!”

In the face of Aileen’s rage, Kei wore an utterly surprised expression, “I tried to though? But you just refused and said, ‘I’m not interested’, you know?”

“Eh?”

Aileen froze up involuntarily. She frantically searched her memories, but she couldn’t recall a single time they talked about astrology in her two years with Kei.

“…Really? I don’t remember that.”

“I think it was about a year ago. At the pub in Urvan I said to you, ‘Hey Andrei, do you want to hear about the law of the mysterious stars? The truth about this vast universe is yours to uncover.’ Then you told me, ‘Not interested in that stuff, try someone else.’”

“That’s obviously your fault!! What are you, the founder of a new religion?! Yeah, it was that time. I remember now. I thought that it was just another one of your hard to understand ramblings, so I ignored it, dammit!” She cursed at him while scratching her head roughly. She sighed, “Well, whatever. And so?”

“…I,” Kei hesitated for a moment. Then he clearly said, “I think that, maybe, this place really is 『Demondal』.”

“…Sounds like another breakthrough. So, something here is so similar to 『Demondal』 that this may be a parallel world?”

“You could say that, yes.”

“…I’m pretty sure this happened in a recent anime. While playing the game the characters were sent into the game world. Did you see that one too?”

“No, unfortunately I don’t really know much about anime.”

“Heh, it’s weird that a Russian knows more about anime than a Japanese. Oh well. After that, the game world became reality for them. I think that maybe… we’re like those

players. If you think about it, having a major update that would drastically improve performance and at the same time cause the system to malfunction, preventing us from logging out… It's quite possible." Aileen then said with an earnest expression that, of course, she still wasn't satisfied with much of the explanation.

Rather than disagreeing with Kei's opinion, she brought it up for the sake of the argument.

"I've thought about that too. However, Aileen, because it is realistic I don't agree." He stared at Aileen. "Aileen. Is your VR system 'External' or 'Implant'?"

Confused, she answered his abrupt question, "Huh…? It's the typical 'External' one."

Currently, VR machines fall under two general categories: 'External' or 'Implant'.

Just as the name implies, 'External' VR systems perform their functions on the brain and nervous system from outside of the body. This system specializes in customization. By changing out certain parts, one could freely adjust the functionality and ability of their machine.

On the other hand, 'Implant' VR systems are embedded directly into the user's body and connect to the cerebral nerves. It's an electronic machine that mimics the nervous system. Their flaw is that the hardware on the hybrid computers embedded directly into the body, is difficult to change out.

The 'Implants' main feature is their accurate information relay. However, customizing the machine is rather difficult to do. Also while using other devices in conjunction with 'Externals' causes some interference, 'Implants' can't be used with other devices at all.

Currently, 'Externals' are the most common system due to its better performance. Many people are having their 'Implants' removed and are changing to 'Externals'.

—Aside from a small fraction of people.

"I have an 'Implant'," Kei continued, "Specifically, it's the 'IMBI-Type P'."

"'IMBI', and a 'Type P' at that?! Isn't that the first model of VR systems?"

“Yes, it’s old. But sadly, I’m still using it.”

“…So that means…”

“Well, I do think something is wrong, but…” Kei breathed shallowly. “I’m bedridden with a disease called fibrodysplasia ossificans progressiva—a rare disease that changes muscle into bone. I first showed symptoms about 15 years ago. About five years ago, I stopped being able to move.”

“…”

Aileen was overwhelmed and kept silent, but Kei’s story didn’t stop there, “Right now, I’m a lump of growing bones and a nervous system. I took part in clinical trials 12 years ago, and the results were outstanding. I helped implement VR systems for a practical use—but, the components of it were larger than anticipated. It fused with my nerves so now I can’t change it out. Since then they’ve kept a close eye on both the hardware and the software, somehow they’ve manage to update it. Although the last update was three years ago.”

“Speaking of three years…”

“That’s right, that was the year 『Demondal』 first launched.” A fleeting smile flashed across his face.

“I jumped at their slogan, ‘A reality like never before’. The most important part for someone like me who spent all their time in virtual reality, was human interaction. It was worth it, so I underwent surgery for the machine’s installation. My family, the doctor, the supervising college professor, they all were against it. It wasn’t clear if my already weak body would be able to handle it or not. But I selfishly told them, ‘At any cost, I want reality. Living any more idly than this would just be more painful.’ They all gave in in the end.”

Kei continued telling his story with dream-like eyes. “Honestly, 『Demondal』’s reality was amazing. The wind over the grassy plains, the sound of leaves rustling in the wind, even the warmth of the sun felt real. Plants and animals, NPC behavior, the feeling of my own body, everything that I could see, and everything that I could touch, seemed real. 『Demondal』’s ‘reality’ was on an entirely different level than any other game. Almost everything that I needed, 『Demondal』had available—but, there was a limit.” Kei met

Aileen's eyes and quietly smiled. "My machine is optimized for 『Demondal』. Even though I've worn it out, it still has some life to it; it still can run the game. But, it's at its limit, Aileen. No matter what kind of major update, no matter the technological innovation–" Kei scooped up some of the sand at his feet and watched it fall through the cracks between his fingers. He resolutely stated, "–My machine wouldn't be able to handle the information processing."

"…"

Aileen said nothing.

"…Well, that turned into a dark story, but enough about me. What I wanted to say was that we'll soon find out if this world is inside the game, or if it is a parallel world. Of course, even my machine could easily handle a major update for a time. I would just be waiting for the system to falter and terminate the program. So, what I suggest is—Hey, wait, are you crying?"

"I… no, I'm definitely not…"

"No, you're obviously crying, aren't you?"

Kei walked over to Aileen, who was covering her face with her hands, and patted her back while wearing a wry smile.

"There's no reason for you to cry. Long ago, I may have cried too. But, because of this virtual reality technology, I'm not really unhappy, you know."

"Y-you're wrong. It's not… like I'm pitying… you…"

"It's fine, don't worry about it."

Kei hugged Aileen from behind and gently stroked her head like one does when calming a baby.

Why am I consoling her? He thought it funny and couldn't hold back a snicker.

"…I'm sorry. I'm good now."

Just a couple minutes later Aileen calmed down. She gently stroked Kei's hands, which were still on her shoulders. With two more pats on her shoulder, Kei returned to sitting in front of her.

"…"

He made eye contact with Aileen over the fire and she looked away seemingly embarrassed, "…It's not what you think. I wasn't crying because I felt bad for you."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, well… that's how it is. So please don't worry about it."

Kei returned her denial with a small smile.
"Enough, let's continue from before."

"Alright. So, what was it that you were going to suggest?"

"It's nothing special. What I was going to suggest was that we should treat this as a parallel world that is similar to 『Demondal』. If this is inside of the game and the system malfunctioned, then there would be a fix within a few days. Aileen, it's a little personal, but do you live by yourself?"

"No. I live with my family."

"No need to worry then. Once it's time to eat your family should pull off your machine if you don't go. Unlike anime, the machine won't fry your brain if someone tries to interfere with it."

"Hey, you lied saying that you don't know much about anime, didn't you?"

"Who knows?"

They giggled together.

“Well, with that said, as long as this is inside the game there is no reason to panic. Although, if this does happen to be a parallel world…”

“We should panic a little.”

“That’s right. We should act as though it’s the worst case of the two theories,” Kei concluded and gave a small sigh. He was parched. Telling his long story made him thirsty.

“…Aileen, do you have any water?”

“Water? I think I have a canteen in Sasuke’s saddle pouch.”
“‘Well prepared means no worries’, huh.”[3]

“Nothing, just talking to myself. I’m going to take a drink, I’m thirsty.”

Kei got up and approached Sasuke, who tilted his head as if saying, “You called me?” He went through the contents of the saddle pouch.

Aileen called out to Kei, who was still searching for the water, “So, what are we going to do now?”

“Hmm. What should we do?”

“We can’t just stay here forever, right?”

“We’re thirsty. Our butts are sore. We should search for some sort of civilization, shouldn’t we?”

“That’s what it comes down to after all.”

Sure enough, the canteen was at the very bottom of the pouch. Kei pushed aside the potions and grabbed hold of it. Thank goodness, he thought to himself. Without even shaking the canteen to check, it felt decently full. It was difficult to find words expressing his fortune that Aileen carried a canteen around, since he would rather not quench his

thirst with a bad tasting potion.

He removed the cap and slowly poured the water into his mouth. Kei thought, It'd be really hard to believe this is a game… He felt the water flow down his throat. He didn't believe that the realness of this feeling could possibly be replicated through VR technology.

Earlier, Kei said that they should move on the assumption that they were in a parallel world. However, Kei was already half-certain that it was a parallel world—he even wished it was so.

I wonder why this is happening though, he thought, as he held some water in his mouth. If I'm not mistaken, before we got here we picked up the『Dragon Stinger』 from the coastal town of Kitene, then we fought off the brigands that attacked us. I wonder… what happened after that? He couldn't recall.

"Aileen."

"Hm?"

"What were we doing just before we got here? On our way back from Kitene, those brigands attacked us, and then we turned the tables on them. That's as far as I can remember…"

"Now that you mention it… Why did we forget?" Aileen put her hand on her chin in thought. "…Beat the brigands… Only went a little… at 'Urvan Valley'…"

Just then, they both remembered and simultaneously said, "The fog!"

Just why did they forget?

That's right, a mysterious fog at the valley. Then they entered the fog together. After that —

"…"

After that—

"…Shit, I can't remember," cursed Kei.

Something. Something was there. He couldn't say exactly what, but something was there —

"Bururu."

Kei snapped his head up at a snort from Mikazuki.

Up until this point Mikazuki had been in his own world, eating grass. He stood up and looked around. His ears twitched and his eyes narrowed in anxiety.

"…Mikazuki?"

Kei knew what was coming. This expression, these movements. They were the same as Mikazuki's AI when it had been a game.

—It was when an enemy was nearing them.

Kei heard something whistle quietly through the air. Chills ran down his spine.

Bloodlust.

"Wha-!!"

His body moved before his mind. As if trying to avoid the chilling sensation he doubled over backwards. Not even an arm's length away, something flew by. An arrow smacked the face of the rock and rebounded.

—Someone shot at me.

—Why did they attack?

—How many? From where?

Such thoughts flooded his mind, but the sound of something flying through the air interrupted him. He felt the chills run down his spine again. However, in that moment he realized that he wasn’t the one being targeted.

He looked toward where the bloodlust was aimed. Straight ahead was a blonde girl.

“Aileen, du—”

Thud. The heavy sound of hitting muscle. An arrow sprouted from the right side of Aileen’s chest.

“…Eh?” She murmured, her eyes wide in disbelief. She looked toward Kei, ‘What?’ written on her face. “Ah…” She slumped over.

“Aileen!!!”

—Like a marionette that had its strings cut, she fell.

Vermillion - Chapter 6

6. Escape

Kei was quick to move. He cursed, “God damn it!” while kicking the camp fire wood. The fire scattered and went out, covering the area in darkness.

“Aileen!”

He quickly grabbed Aileen and nimbly carried her, practically tumbling behind the rock. It was the so-called ‘Princess Carry’. However, this heroine lost her romantic appeal due to the arrow stuck in her chest. The petite girl, snugly held in his arms, was surprisingly light.

“Get it together,” Kei told her quietly.

But she couldn’t answer. Her face was distorted with pain and she breathed in short, shallow breaths.

—We were careless, he thought in disgust as he clenched his teeth.

It was a new moon, only the faint light of the stars shone upon the grassy plains. The light from their fire would certainly stick out, even from a long distance.

Even in the game we needed to remain vigilant…!

NPC thieves, monsters that are unafraid of fire, even PKers. Carelessly standing out at night, especially with only a small party, was dangerous even in the game. The same goes especially if it were a parallel world.

If we had at least not kept our backs exposed, Kei cursed his carelessness.

Aileen's 『Enhanced Vision』 wasn't as good as Kei's crest-engraved eyes in the dark. Therefore, her 'Passive Sense' couldn't optimally activate.

He had the highest level of vision, being a long distance archer. Combined with his sensitivity to bloodlust, he should have been the one to keep watch.

Kei was also panicked about the day's events. They completely forgot the idea of keeping watch.

"Ugh… Ke…i…" Aileen groaned, her forehead damp with sweat.

Everything swirling around in his head suddenly stopped. He changed gears and thought, Well, what do I do now? There isn't much time.

Kei popped his head out from behind the rock and looked over the area. Without the light of the fire, it was nearly pitch black. However, with his vision, his eyes quickly adapted to the darkness.

Three, five, no—six people that I can see.

Camouflaged with grass, the shadows of people wriggled. Taking the rock's blind spots into account, Kei estimated two or three more waited in ambush. They were completely surrounded.

Whoever the assailant was didn't matter in this situation. What was important was the intellect to maintain archers and surround them.

"…… Ой……Поче …… у ," Aileen quietly muttered something seemingly incoherent while slightly trembling. Kei had trouble hearing it, and didn't understand the meaning. Her gaze was distant and unfocused. It was hard to see her pupils, but her face was pale.

"Don't speak, just stay still," Kei whispered into her ear while trying to think of what to do next. It didn't take long to decide. "Mikazuki, Sasuke, come."

Mikazuki answered with a, “Bururu.”

Quick, but careful not to touch Aileen’s wound, Kei straddled Mikazuki. “Aileen, this will hurt a little, but please bear with it.”

Perhaps she caught his words. She muttered something quietly and faintly nodded.

“Here we go!” Kei spurred on Mikazuki.

Sure enough the dark brown horse cantered forward without as much as a whinny.

“They’re on a horse!”

“They’re getting away!”

The hidden assailants stood up after seeing Kei and Aileen burst out from behind the rock.

Their bow strings made a twang and sent arrows whistling through the air. Kei’s face stiffened, but it seemed like they weren’t going to be hit. The bloodlust felt as if it were aimed in an entirely different direction. He let his tense shoulders relax a little.

Turning around, he saw the leather-clad men flail their weapons in an uproar. Another arrow was shot at them, but the archer probably couldn’t see them well since it missed by a few meters. Out of the remaining men, Kei couldn’t spot a single one riding a horse.

–They managed to easily escape.

Kei checked to make sure.

Naturally, Aileen’s treatment should have come before running away.

From what he could see, the arrow in her chest barely missed a group of arteries. Depending on the tip, it may still have damaged some veins though.

At the very least, she has a ruptured lung. She’ll have trouble breathing if this keeps up. Also, holding her while being jolted on top of a horse certainly couldn’t be good for her.

Although, being surrounded by the enemy made treating her rather difficult.

Of course, if they used a potion, then the wound may have healed completely then and there. But when he thought about the pain she went through with healing the cut on her palm… It would most likely not show immediate effects on a wound this serious, either. In

the worst case, she could pass out from the pain.

During recovery Aileen would be completely defenseless. Even after, if she fainted, then he would have to fight while protecting her. Taking all that in to consideration, he was only left with the safest option—escape.

Before setting up camp, Kei climbed up the rocky mountain to survey the geography. If they continued west as they were, they would run into the woods.

It wasn't exactly safe; he didn't know what kinds of monsters could be lurking there, but at the least, it would be difficult for anybody to pursue them.

He would heal Aileen in the woods, and then they could continue to flee. Or, depending on her condition, he could have her ride Sasuke while he turned back and attacked them alone—

"Awoo, awoo."

A beast's cries from behind interrupted Kei's train of thought.

He turned around. Low to the ground three large black shadows ran toward them.

"—'Hound Wolves'!"

They had black, unkempt fur and sharp, pointed ears. Even with only the starlight, their eyes glowed eerily. The leather collars they wore around their necks showed that they weren't wild, but were owned by a person.

Hound Wolf, otherwise known as, 'Black Siccer'.

In the game, they were an offensive type of pet and were extremely popular. The hardest part of taming one is stripping it of its brutal nature. Once tamed, they will carry out any order in any situation with complete loyalty.

They were far more nimble than their large stature would suggest, and were quick witted with unparalleled stamina, and high attack power. And above all else, they had a frightening tracking ability.

The wolves use their sense of smell to obstinately chase down their prey wherever they go. Even after galloping throughout the night on horseback, it was possible for the wolves to catch up in approximately thirty minutes.

Even if they were to run to the ends of the earth, their 'scent' would still linger for the wolves to follow.

There were only two ways that the Hound Wolves would stop their pursuit. If the owner called them off with a whistle, or when they take down and kill their prey.

They could even be called the Forerunners of Death—and three of them were chasing Kei and Aileen.

"…This isn't good."

The wolves ran like they were a pack, driving on together. Surprise flooded Kei's face. Until just a moment ago, they had an easy-going flight. But now, it was changed completely into a difficult situation. Even Sasuke, running behind Mikazuki, showed signs

of panic.

For a horseback archer like Kei, Hound Wolves weren't such a frightening foe. In a confrontation with Kei's infallible marksmanship and his top-of-the-line horse, Mikazuki, an enemy who only had speed, wasn't good enough. Their larger bodies made them easier to take down than a rabbit in the grassy plains. At least, that's how it would be in a normal situation.

But now, he was holding Aileen and couldn't use his bow.

He couldn't use his bow.

…We're in trouble, thought Kei as sweat dampened his brow.

To Kei, who mainly used a bow from horseback, having that taken away from him was an unforeseen situation.

For argument's sake, if it had been a game then Kei would have immediately dropped and left Aileen.

She could possibly die from the impact of hitting the ground, or could be devoured by the Hound Wolves. However, in that short moment Kei would've been able to use his bow to kill off the wolves.

Afterward, everything would be fine because he would collect the loot, including Aileen's, and have her respawn at her base. That way they could avoid losing any items and minimize the death penalty.

In short, inside the game, if victory was assured then there would be no merit to keeping his offensive abilities inhibited.

However, when it comes to reality—

I suppose I can't just drop her and go.

In Kei's arms, Aileen grimaced as if trying to deal with the jolting from the horse.

Abandoning such a fragile girl would be no more than an act of savagery. Even if he was ordered to, he wouldn't be able to do it.

If this were『Demondal』then even reviving would be possible, but…

As long as the possibility exists that this is just a world that looks like the game, he couldn't be too rash.

It was too dangerous to be thrown onto the stage with no practice.

"Awoo, ohn!" a wolf howled. The hound wolves slowly caught up as he was thinking.

The black-furred pursuers ran full speed and easily passed Mikazuki with their lightning speed.

It's unfortunate, but even the horse with the highest level in stamina and speed in the game, prided in its excellent long distance performance, Mikazuki, was weak to this type of foe. Mikazuki was not the powerful kind, but rather the fast kind. Having even just one more person like Aileen on the horse dropped the maximum travel distance sharply.

“Hey, Mikazuki, step on it! I know you’re faster than this!!”

Mikazuki glanced at Kei as if saying don’t ask for the impossible. Even so, he ran hard.

While his muscles weren’t too dense and he didn’t appear to be, he was actually pretty heavy. Overloading Mikazuki with another rider is what caused this sticky situation.

…Looks like we won’t be able to just run away.

He knew it, but he thought it over again as he stared into the distance. Aileen’s throwing knife pouch came into his view momentarily. Sadly, Kei was no good with throwing knives. Honestly, he had never tried it seriously.

Thoughts like, if I had known it would come to this then I would’ve practiced seriously, crowded his mind. But it was too late for regrets.

Life is about playing the hand you’re dealt, huh.

He reached into the pouch slung at his waist and pulled out a pebble-like lead ball about the size of a quail egg. It was a pebble.

It was something he carried with him as a personal protection charm. Its effects on the thick-furred wolves would be limited, but still better than nothing.

“If it could at least trip them up…”

Kei decided to aim for the Hound Wolf to his right.

Mikazuki sensed what Kei was doing from the movement in the stirrups and turned his head sideways and turned on a dime.

The rapidly approaching wolves ran low to the ground in preparation to pounce. Just as they put power into their hind legs to attack Mikazuki, Kei threw something down from his right hand.

Kei moved nimbly as he threw various pebbles from point blank range with his above average strength.

The wolves weren’t even given the time to react, the power hidden in the pebbles blew up in their faces.

“Gyan!” The Hound Wolf yelped and tripped from the strong attack.

It lay on the ground, writhing and covering its nose as it shrank away into the distance.

After defeating the lead runner, Kei relaxed a little. But, “Bururu,” Mikazuki warned him.

On the left was a wolf already at point-blank range preparing itself to pounce.

—Crap!

He determined that taking out another pebble would take too long, so he reached for the short sword on his hip.

The Hound Wolf kicked off the ground the same moment that Kei drew his sword.

However keen and nimble a wolf it was, once airborne it couldn’t change its body position. Kei stabbed directly at the scruff of its neck.

He felt his short sword cut through the flesh and all the way to the bone. A wet cough escaped from the wolf's throat. However, the Hound Wolf didn't falter; it opened its mouth wide and twisted its head to go for Kei's right arm.

Its tenacity and willpower surprised Kei to the point of dropping his sword.

The Hound Wolf with its throat cut failed to bite its target, and died just like that in the grass.

"Only one more to go…!"

He looked at the last, oncoming Hound Wolf, and rummaged around his pouch.

Two pebbles left.

He held one in his right hand. He carefully aimed at the wolf.

"Grrr…" It growled as if on guard. The wolf lowered its body closer to the ground, and bit by bit it changed its course, trying to toy with Kei. It knew he held something dangerous.

Kei thought to himself that the beast in front of him was truly intelligent, but while he admired it, he was also a bit annoyed.

"Just like the game, as long as I calmly let it come at me it should be okay…!" He spat out and glared at the black beast.

—Die!

Kei filled his body with strength and used the strongest killing intent he could. His bloodlust gave off such a dense pressure that it could even be felt physically. It made all the fur on the Hound Wolf stand on end.

It unknowingly began to tremble, and for just a moment, it froze up.

At just that moment, Kei's right arm became a blur.

The lead pebble whistled through the air. He threw it with all his strength; a guaranteed kill shot.

Luckily for the wolf (not so much for Kei), he messed up his aim.

The pebble was slightly off of its brow, where Kei aimed. Instead, it barely clipped the

hound’s ear before hitting it in the back.

The pebble went through the pelt and hit hide. It sounded painful. But, to the Hound Wolf this amount of pain was nothing more than being rubbed the wrong way.

Shrugging off Kei’s earlier frightening presence, the wolf bared its fangs and barked viciously while charging towards Kei.

“So ’Offensive Sense’ doesn’t work well…”

He sighed, if only I were more used to thrown weapons…

The wolf’s eyes became bloodshot after the pebble missed. It rushed right in front of Kei, but even then Kei was calm.

It was all coming to an end anyhow.

The wolf focused all of its attention on Kei, forgetting the other one only until the dark brown hair came into its peripheral vision.

“Bururu—!”

From behind the wolf Sasuke came fiercely charging in.

Involuntarily, the Hound Wolf was taken aback in surprise. Sasuke used his right fore-hoof and mercilessly kicked its defenseless flank.

It sounded like the ground being torn. The black wolf’s stomach was ripped to shreds.

The wolf spat up blood and stumbled to a halt, where Sasuke kicked with both rear legs. Bits and pieces of entrails scattered and flew.

“Well done!!”

Hearing Kei’s joyous voice, Sasuke wore a proud expression as if saying, haha, aren’t I strong? Sharp, hardened bone was hidden; folded under the heel portion of his hooves.

He was a Bowser Horse.

They have the highest performance abilities of all horse type mounts, but strictly speaking, they aren’t horses.

Camouflaged as high level horses they are ferocious omnivorous monsters.

Taming one is considered to be even more difficult than a Hound Wolf. Even once successfully tamed, they require proper care.

“…You did well too, Mikazuki. Thank you.”

Kei patted his neck as thanks. A reply was unnecessary, but Mikazuki seemed like he wanted to. He glanced up at Kei and whinnied.

If the horses weren’t shown gratitude, it would ruin their moods and they’d become as stubborn as a donkey. That was how the AI was in the game, so it should be similar in this world.

I need to buy some carrots once we get to town… No, I worked Mikazuki hard, I should get some meat…

Kei thought to himself as a grove of trees came into view in front of them.

Well, tending to Aileen comes first, I suppose…

Thinking about it made him depressed.

He anxiously rode Mikazuki into the dark grove.

† † †

Inside the grove, it was nearly pitch black. The overgrown leaves overhead blocked out the starlight.

Mikazuki had the vision enhancing crest just like Kei, but Sasuke did not, so he had a hard time walking. Kei had to lead him by the reins.

“…Now then, I guess this is good.”

He stopped Mikazuki about 100 meters in. There were absolutely no living creatures in sight. Mikazuki was calm, so that meant there were no enemies, even above them.

“Hey, Aileen. Can you hear me?” Kei asked as he wiped the sweat off her brow.

“где…кто…?” Aileen muttered quietly, as if she were plagued by a nightmare. Kei couldn’t understand what she was saying, as it was entirely in Russian.

Holding Aileen, he slowly dismounted. He took off his cloak and laid it over the dead and decaying leaves, then laid down Aileen.

“Okay. Mikazuki, Sasuke, you’re on guard duty.”

Mikazuki replied with a snort, and Sasuke began wandering and looking around with a smart expression. Even though he most likely only saw darkness.

“Let’s start.”

Kei lightly washed his hands with water from the canteen and inspected Aileen’s wound.

Her black clothes got in the way, so he went to pull out his short sword to cut it, but nothing was in the scabbard. Then he remembered, he’d just parted with it during the fight

with the Hound Wolves.

“Aileen, I’m going to be borrowing your knife.”

He pulled out a throwing knife and cut the cloth at her chest.

“…Hm.”

As one would expect, he didn’t feel any ulterior motives even while looking at a cute girl’s chest while there was an arrow sprouting from it.

“…Just two centimeters higher and this would’ve hit her right subclavian artery[1].

The arrow was stuck snugly between her rib bones. Judging from the wound, the arrow wasn’t a broadhead nor barbed. Kei determined that it was a simple blunt tip, or at least similar in shape. Therefore, pulling out the arrow most likely wouldn’t make the wound bigger.

Kei wanted to tend the wound immediately, but before pulling it out he thought that Aileen should heal a little first. “Aileen. Can you hear me? Can you drink a potion?”

He repeated it in her ear, but that didn’t elicit a good response either. Aileen had been quietly murmuring to herself ever since earlier, but through her hoarse voice it sounded like it was Russian.

With no other choice left, he would have to slowly dribble it into her mouth, but she spoke, “…не вкусно…” Most of the liquid spilled over her lips as her expression turned into a grimace. He still had no clue what she was saying, but it was probably ‘Yuck’. At any rate, as long as she was out of it, they wouldn’t be able to communicate properly.

…But if I think about it, isn’t this actually a good chance?

With the potion in hand, he reconsidered.

Extreme pain could possibly accompany the healing from potions.

Just by healing a cut on her palm, Aileen was coated in cold sweat. And now, pulling an arrow out of her chest and closing up the wound—he didn't even want to think about how painful it would be.

He thought about it briefly before deciding. "…I guess it would be best to hurry and get it done while she's still out of it…?" He nodded once to himself and then removed his gauntlet and rolled up his sleeve.
Just in case, he placed several ready to use potions at his knees. Kei exhaled and gripped the arrow.

"…"

He had pulled out countless arrows in the game, but the pressure was different in reality. Holding the wound with his left hand, he felt her heart beating.

Kei took a deep breath, "Let's do this."

Preparing himself for the worst, he took care not to open the wound further and then, to minimize the pain, he boldly pulled the arrow out in one swift motion.

"Nngh…!?" Aileen grimaced in pain and twisted her body while groaning. Black-ish blood came spilling from the wound. It was venous[2] blood. No arteries were hit.

"Now then, don't blame me for this, Aileen…"

Muttering that it was for her sake, Kei tipped one of the potions over the wound.

The viscous light blue liquid trickled down and touched the wound.

"Unngh!!!!"

It sounded like the sizzling of meat on a grill. Aileen snapped her eyes open, "Gii—!!!"

As she shrieked he pinned her down while she began to violently struggle and continued

to trickle the potion on her wound. Not using enough of the potion and leaving the wound only half healed would be the worst outcome in this case.

“Aaahhhh—!!!!”

It may have been due to the pain, but Aileen tried to push away Kei’s arms with a surprising amount of strength for such a small body. Her shrieks then sounded like the howl of a beast, completely unlike a young girl.

“Sorry, Aileen, calm down! Forgive me!”

The light blue liquid suspiciously inched its way to the wound as if it was a worm and had its own will. It sounded eerily like a pot of boiling water.

Before long, her violent struggle became small spasms and her eyes rolled back into her head, exposing only the whites of her eyes.

Occasionally, she coughed violently, spitting up a reddish brown mass each time. Then almost at the end, some strange steam or vapor came out of her nose and mouth and began to rise. Perhaps the potion had fully volatized.

“…ah…ngh…”

At the very end, when she settled down, foam started to come out of her mouth. Like the potion, the foam was a faint light blue.

“…”

Kei forgot to breathe and drew away from the pitiful scene for a little, but then, concerned, he took Aileen’s pulse.

“…Thank god. She’s alive.”

She continued to foam as she twitched, so it should have been obvious that she was still alive. However, after checking her pulse himself he sighed in relief.

Next, he checked the wound. Just like with her palm, there was a white scar left behind, but the wound itself was completely closed.

He put his ear on her chest and checked her breathing as well. It was a bit fast, but he only heard well-regulated heart beats and nothing to indicate any abnormalities with her respiratory system.

“Safe for now, huh…”

No matter how much time passed, her eyes still remained white which creeped him out, so he closed her eyelids.

“…I’ll have to be careful to not get seriously hurt.” Kei muttered, “Otherwise I’d end up just like this.”

“Bururu.” Mikazuki clearly agreed with a quiet snort.

“…Hm?” Kei raised his head and looked into the distance.

It had been nearly pitch black in the grove earlier, but now he could see a light at the edge.

The orange light swayed slowly.

While he was watching he saw one, two, and more and more lights.

“Will-O-Wisps…?”

Kei was suspicious of the low ranking spirits of the deceased, but soon realized that wasn’t what they were.

They were man-made fires. It was torch light. Their movements were small, but he was certain that they were approaching. Although they had torches out, it was too dark and they were too far for him to make out who they were.

“…It doesn’t look like those guys from before…”

They were coming from the opposite side. Besides that, it was too soon for them to have gotten here on foot.

“…”

What to do.

Kei hesitated for a short while before reaching a conclusion.

“Let’s go check it out. I’m counting on you, Mikazuki.”

Carrying Aileen, he once again mounted Mikazuki.

Kei put on his headpiece, fastened a cloth around his mouth to hide his face, and checked his backup weapon. He’d lost his short sword and used two pebbles, but everything else was in order. No problem.

He gave a small nod and grabbed Sasuke’s reins, then lightly kicked Mikazuki’s flank.

The distance between them was quickly covered by trotting, as they weren’t all that far away. The lights became clearer and clearer as they narrowed the gap.

“…A village?”

In the grove, a cleared out section of land turned out to be a small village. Kei could see a number of villagers holding torches coming and going hurriedly in front of a large log house.

“…Hey, something is coming!”

“Everybody, gather up!”

“The light! Bring the light!”

They probably heard Mikazuki and Sasuke’s hooves, throwing them into this panic.

…English, huh. At least we’ll be able to understand each other.

As he thought to himself, the small village was suddenly illuminated by several fiercely burning cressets[3] placed around it.

About ten villagers readied their clubs or bows and arrows, facing in Kei’s direction.

He lightly pulled Mikazuki’s reins slowing him down to a walk, and they slowly approached the village.

Among the villagers, one spear wielding man with a tough face stepped forward and challenged Kei, “Halt! Who goes there?”

It had only been several hours since Kei and Aileen had been transported to the world of 『Demondal』.

—The first villager confronted them.

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Vermillion - Chapter 7

7. Tahfu

The firewood in the cresset crackled.

“—Who goes there?!” About ten steps away, a man with a tough face and a spear challenged Kei.

The villager’s face was flushed with nervousness. Full of suspicion, his gaze pierced through Kei.

The other men around him also had the same look. They were hunched over and held any weapons they had on hand; clubs, hoes, and lumber axes readied, prepared to move at any time.

It was their entire combat force. Not a single one of them even tried to hide their wariness toward Kei.

…What a warm welcome this is.

Their focus on Kei sent a tingle down his spine. Not quite bloodlust, but it was obvious that he was an uninvited guest.

Kei briefly thought to himself, how should I go about answering? He couldn’t stay quiet forever. “I’m not anyone suspicious,” letting them know he wasn’t an enemy came first.

“’Not anyone suspicious’…?”

The villagers confronting Kei murmured with each other quietly.

A new moon in the dead of night. Hardly the time for someone to go for a stroll.
He came out from the darkness on horseback without a torch.
His entire body is covered in leather armor. A sword at his hip, and a heavy bow in hand.
Lastly, he’s holding a young girl in his left arm.
Her brow was slick with sweat, she was pale like a sickly person.
She wore foreign black clothes that they had never seen before.
But for some reason, it seemed she was roughed up by someone.
The front of her clothes were cut open, exposing her white chest.

“…”

—He’s suspicious. He’s way too suspicious.

That was the consensus of the men. In fact, there wasn’t a single non-suspicious point about him.

“…So, who are you?” the man in the middle asked again, but with a lower tone, readying his spear once more.

They’re being even more cautious of me…? Kei pondered to himself, but then replied, “Right. To put it frankly, we were just attacked by robbers and wound up here after escaping.”

He then summed up exactly what their situation was.

They were surrounded by fog and before they knew it they were somewhere unfamiliar. The sun had set so they set up camp, but then were attacked by what seemed to be a group of thieves before escaping into the grove of trees.

After that, he noticed torchlight in the pitch black and went toward it. That was the situation.

He didn’t tell a single lie. Although, he did keep the fact that they were players from a game called 『Demondal』 hidden. He spoke as if they were normal travelers through and through.
After listening to Kei’s story the tough faced villager slightly lowered his spear and asked with a bewildered yet cautious expression, “…So, in the end, what is it that you want?”

“Honestly, we didn’t come here with any particular desire. We just came to check out what the light was… Why exactly were you all up and moving about at this hour?” questioned Kei.

“…I’ll answer your question,” said a deep-voiced man casually.

It came from Kei’s right. A man holding a bow sluggishly came out from the shadows of a small house, perfectly in Kei’s blind spot.

His face was good looking. He looked sullen with the lower half of his face concealed by a reddish brown beard. The man was well-built, with an honest and serious face. Tight brown clothes wrapped around his body and a feather decorated leather cap adorned his head.

“I’m Mandel… A hunter of this village,” said the good looking man—Mandel—as he lightly removed his cap.

Kei realized that he had yet to give his name. “I’m Kei. A pleasure.” As he said this, perhaps due to being an archer himself, his eyes were naturally drawn to the bow Mandel was holding.

It was a simple short bow. It was made of wood with a glossy finish, while the handle was wrapped with black cloth. Several other villagers also carried bows, but Mandel’s gave off the impression of long use. It was most likely used for hunting day after day.

Mandel’s hat drew Kei’s attention next. Specifically, the feather on it. He stared at the feather on Mandel’s hat.

“…”

For a moment, they caught each other’s gaze.

Smiles crept up onto both of their faces. A silent understanding. The men around them all

wore perplexed expressions.

“…And as for why we were moving about,” Mandel returned to being straight-faced as if nothing happened and continued to speak, “just a bit ago, we suddenly heard a terrible howl. Everyone roused themselves out of bed… It may have been a ferocious monster.”

“Monster?”

“Yeah. They occasionally come into human territory from the woods or the mountains in this season. We can’t let ourselves get attacked while we sleep… We’ll probably sleep in shifts tonight.” He gestured to the villagers around him. “Kei, you were in the grove, right…? Did you see anything?”

“Hmm… Not really, I didn’t see anything like that beast you mentioned.”

Even thinking back upon it, he couldn’t think of anything. Only the Hound Wolves sent by their assailants came to mind; they didn’t even make it to the grove.

“I suppose that even if there were a monster you wouldn’t be able to see it in this darkness,” the man with the spear cut into the silence with a hint of irritation.

“Mikazuki—the horses weren’t alerted, so at the very least, there wasn’t anything in the area. For what it’s worth, both this guy and I can see pretty well in the dark,” he patted Mikazuki’s neck.

The villagers eyed up Kei and then the darkness with suspicious expressions. Mandel just nodded and honestly replied with, “I see.”

“—Pardon us while you’re in the middle of your conversation.”

The sound of footsteps on stone approached from the center of the village.

From the darkness appeared a hunched old man with white hair and a plump middle-aged man.

“Welcome, travelers. I am Bennett, the leader of the village ‘Tahfu’.”

“I’m his son, Danny.”

A small smile rose on the old man with white hair, Bennett’s, face. His plump son introduced himself with a haughty attitude.

I see. So the village leader and leader-to-be have shown up.

Kei made sure to not be rude while trying to observe the two.
The village leader, Bennett, seemed like a good-natured old man. At a glance he appeared kind, but below his eyebrows, which were pulled down into a ノ丶 shape, his gaze nonchalantly took in all of Kei. The words ‘devious old man’ came to mind.

On the other hand, there wasn’t much to his son, Danny. He was plump, slovenly, and, whether good or bad, gave off the impression of a born aristocrat. In a way they were alike, but unlike Bennett, he didn’t have a timid face and his gaze toward them was rude. He specifically seemed to focus on Aileen, who was being held by Kei.

And they call this village ‘Tahfu’…

Kei had never heard of the village in the game. As he thought to himself that this wasn’t a

game after all, he spoke, “I apologize for being on horseback. My name is Keiichi Nogawa. Keiichi is my first name, and Nogawa is my family name. I’m sorry for the ruckus we’ve caused.” He said confidently as he removed the cloth hiding his face.

The villagers quietly began talking among themselves. Bennett’s smiling face seemed stuck that way as it had not changed, but Danny’s eyebrows perked up and his complexion became somewhat stiff.

“…Nogawa-dono[1]. What can our village do for you?” Bennett asked politely with his insincere smile.

“Just Kei is fine. We just finished discussing that earlier, but we didn’t come here with any particular desire in mind. Although,” his eyes fell to the girl in his arms.

She was sweating still and moaned in her sleep, “Uungh…”

Kei resumed, “She isn’t in very good shape. If possible, I want to let her rest…” He asked the rest with his eyes, How about it? He continued further, “Of course, we will provide appropriate compensation.”

“I see, I see,” Bennet slowly responded agreeably. “As you said, your friend doesn’t seem too well. However, I am not certain whether or not our small village will have anything of use to you… I will ask the other villagers. Danny, Cronen, help me.”

Bennett bowed as if to say, we will return shortly, and then turned and walked away. Danny and the spear wielder—apparently named Cronen—followed suit.

As Kei watched them from atop his horse, Bennett and Cronen gave off a similar feeling. He shifted his attention to the figure behind them, “…Mandel.”

“Hm…? What is it?”

“That guy, Cronen, the spear wielder, is he related to the leader?”

“Yes, he’s also his son… The eldest is Danny, next is Cronen.”

“I see. Thank you.”

Satisfied, Kei thought to himself that there was a little of an age gap between the two brothers, unaware of the grim faces the villagers around him wore.

After moving far enough into the darkness that Kei wouldn't be able to see, Bennett began, "So, Cronen. If I recall, you have an open bed in your house, no?"

"Father! You couldn't possibly be considering letting them into our village?"

"That was my intention." At Cronen's raised voice Bennett tilted his head as if to ask, was I wrong?

"You both heard his story! What would we do if he's one of those thieves?!"

That seemed to be the most of Cronen's worries.

Pretending to be attacked by thieves and dressing up one member as someone that barely escaped alive—slipping into their target village, trying to undermine the authority from the inside, and then taking advantage of the chaos and attacking.

Cronen had often heard from peddlers that a group of thieves used this trick to make easy money.

"Hah… I was wondering what the fuss was about, but I guess that's it. Seriously, did you think that something you came up with hadn't already been considered by me or Father?" Danny shrugged his shoulders and sighed after making that spiteful remark. The atmosphere around them all but said, this is why you're a failure of a brother.

"Your way of thinking is too extreme, Cronen. The possibility of that is low," Bennett wasn't angry nor mocking him; he just said plainly, "I am aware that recently there have been groups like that. However, the way that Kei-something snuck in would have been too suspicious. He picked up the grassland peoples' habit and gave his family name, even. He's not suspicious at all. Also, at best, they're a distraction. If they were thieves and had such quality equipment then they're probably doing fine already."

Danny rubbed his chin as he took over for Bennett, "It's just as Father says. If I were a thief, I would have sent a slightly thinner, normal person in."

"You don't understand because you are a poor judge of character, Cronen. All the equipment that Kei had was top-class, you know."

"…Was it?"

Only after his brother pointed it out, did Cronen look at Kei's belongings and realize that he had entirely read into it too much.

Bennett and Danny, who followed in his footsteps, had experience with various materials as representatives of the village, so they naturally gained the ability to judge quality. Their initial judgement came from their role of carefully observing the other party during their first meeting.

Bennett narrowed his eyes and thought about the equipment Kei wore. "That leather armor is amazingly well made. On top of that, those wonderful ornaments I've never seen before

—even the ones just on his chest piece would be at least ten silver.”

“Ten silver?!” rang Cronen’s hysteric voice at Bennett’s estimation. Ten silver was proportionate to a peasant’s food expenses for a year. “I thought that even expensive leather armor, at most, cost one silver though?”

“Idiot, that’s just tanned leathers that are sewn together; it’s a cheap, poor quality item. Those low quality items can’t be compared with the hardening, defensive capabilities, and the effort put into that guy’s armor. For now, assume he’s of a different social status. Moreover, there’s that small ornament. When I went out shopping before, I looked at various armor, clothing, and accessories, but I didn’t see anything as fashionable as that ornament. Even if it were just a work of art it still holds value.”

“A very skilled artisan must have tailored it. Even if someone saved up, it doesn’t look like something that one can buy on a whim… Besides that, Danny, have you noticed his horse?”

“Yes, it was a very nice horse, wasn’t it!” Danny clapped his hands together and praised their horses, “Their fine colored hair, their clever features, even their physique isn’t comparable to an ordinary horse! I’ve never seen a fine horse, but it would probably be like that. There are even two of them!”

Now that you mention it, Cronen thought. The horse that Kei rode in on certainly seemed like it was top class.

The village only owned one horse, and that was for pulling carts. But comparing it to their horses, filled to the brim with strength, would just be absurd.

“Yes, the horses themselves are quite something, but… it’s their foreheads. They both have talismans embedded.”

“Talismans?” Danny and Cronen simultaneously questioned.

“I myself have only laid eyes upon the real things once. It’s a charm against evil spirits. Not some lucky charm, but one imbued with magic. They are said to weaken the power of devils and magic, protecting the possessor. Even I can feel the magical power; they’re probably very powerful ones.”

Bennett chuckled audibly and smiled.

Except for cases of very talented people, or people who train vigorously, generally, humans’ magic power increased with age. After the age of fifty it would start to increase dramatically.

Along with that, the ability to perceive magic would also increase. The more one ages, the more they perceive. People said that even ‘spirits’ could be sensed with sharp enough senses. It is said that in one’s dying hour, their perception becomes strong enough to see the spirits of the deceased.

Furthermore, even in ‘Tahfu’, the oldest man, Bennett, only slightly felt the power of the talisman.

“A talisman, huh.” Cronen held his chin and exhaled deeply in thought.

—He understood that it was something amazing, but he just couldn’t actually feel it

himself.

That was how Cronen actually felt about it.

In his 20 years of life he had never seen an object imbued with magic. Of course, he knew that such items were valuable; he heard from peddlers that creating magic items took a lot of money. However, since he didn't have any personal experience with it, he couldn't truly understand how amazing it was.

"…That man, just what is he really?"

It seemed that his brother, Danny, had come to grips with the severity of the situation. "Father, it's possible that man is a nobleman."

"You may be right…" Bennett stroked his beard with an easygoing attitude.

"The armor is one thing, but the talisman isn't something you can get just by saving up enough money."

"To think that, even the horses have such a thing…"

"After all, without appropriate social status it would be impossible."

"I can't imagine that the horses would have them but the owners don't."

"I see. Assuming the girl he brought has one too, then there are a total of four talismans… With just what that man has the entire village could live comfortably for an entire year."

"Yeah! Speaking of which, that girl isn't just an ordinary person either!" Danny's nostrils flared and he lost all composure. "The fine smoothness and lack of blemishes on her pure, white skin! Her beautiful, long, lustrous blonde hair! It's impossible for her to be a commoner, she is definitely of noble blood!"

Cronen sighed openly at the plump man's sudden excitement and Bennett's lack of response. He even married the most beautiful girl in the village… His fondness for women is a problem.

Cronen, considerably younger than his brother, looked coldly at him. It was an open secret that when Danny went shopping in town, he would return smelling of brothel perfumes. It wasn't like the village's money was being embezzled, he spent the money from goods that sold higher than expected, so no one ever complained.

"Hey, Father, do the grassland people have nobles as well?" Exhausted, Cronen leaned on his spear for support while questioning Bennett.

"They do not. It is because, fundamentally, they have clans. There are only some clan heads or elders that manage the clan."

"So then, that guy, Kei…"

"He did not have a clan tattoo on his face, and his introduction was unusual. Most likely, he is not one of the grassland people… I don't understand why he would purposely look like one. Just where did he come from?"

"It seems like he himself is unsure. In the middle of his travels he was caught in a fog, before he knew it, he was near the rocky mountain, is what he said. They may have been

caught up in some mysterious phenomenon, he said."

Bennett looked suspiciously at Cronen. And then, realizing that his son took the words of a suspicious traveler at face value, made a half astonished, half resigned face.

"…Well, whatever. It's their business, they probably have things they don't want to talk about. Now then, about what is to come. Hey, Danny! Listen, would you?!"

To Danny, who had been grinningly broadly to himself, everything had been going in one ear and out the other. Now he snapped back to reality.

"Ah, sorry, Father. I was spacing out."

"…Haah. Going back to the first question, Cronen. You have a spare bed in your house, right?"

"Yes. I keep it ready to be used at any time just in case." He gave a small nod.

It was a small room, similar to a storeroom, but his wife liked to keep things clean so it was cleaned regularly.

"Alright. Then I'll be leaving the girl that man brought in your house."

"What was that?! Father, there's a spare bedroom in my house too, you know! I could even wake Cynthia, then another space would be available too!" Danny's nostrils flared once again as he snapped at Bennett's words.

"It would make the morning worse. Let Cynthia, your wife, stay asleep." Bennett bluntly opposed. "Now then, Cronen, I have something to ask of you. Since you are taking care of the girl, I ask you to stand guard over her."

"…Stand guard?"

Not nurse her, but stand guard. Cronen knit his brows at the uncomfortable feeling of the words.

"Yes, stand guard. It's very unlikely… but just in case they actually are thieves."

Seeing Bennett's serious expression, Danny and Cronen naturally became tense too.

"Even a young girl like her could set fire to the village if she isn't watched. Cronen, you are strong and you are skilled. For argument's sake, even if she is a thief, as long as you're there, you could control her."

"Of course, I can't lose to a girl like her," brimming with confidence Cronen nodded.

"Hmm. With that appearance, if she actually had that much energy, then her acting is top-class, but…" Bennett recalled the image of the girl's condition, held in Kei's arms, and muttered quietly, "Well, it's fine. As for Kei, we'll treat him like any other visitor and invite him to my house. And to be safe, I'll call Mandel to guard us.

"Mandel… is coming to our place?" Danny openly wore an expression of distaste.

"There's no helping it. Is there anyone more skilled than Mandel in this village? He has brute strength and incredible marksmanship."

"Well… you're right."

Danny reluctantly acknowledged it, but his unpleasant expression showed he was still unsatisfied. However, Bennett didn’t so much as acknowledge his childish protest. He simply informed them of the decision with a serious expression. “That’s how it is. Neither of you press them for information. They have their reasons for keeping quiet. It is best if we don’t get involved, whatever those reasons may be. Be as polite as you can, take care of them without prejudice, and provide for them what you can. We want them to leave as soon as possible. Don’t forget even a single thing I just said.”

“Yes.”

“Understood.”

At any rate, Bennett nodded a few times at his sons’ understanding.

“—Now then,” Bennett turned, and while hitting his crooked back, smiled. “I can’t have the visitors waiting forever. I should go receive them.”

He slowly began walking towards where his uninvited guests waited, like a kind, amiable old man.

Vermillion - Chapter 8

8. The Reaper

“Please take a seat. We’ll prepare some of our village’s smoked pork.”

Danny, the oldest son, wore an ingratiating smile and placed a plate covered with meat on the table. The change from his earlier haughty attitude was so great that Kei almost laughed.

Bennett said, “This is quite tasty,” as he picked up a knife and began carving it up. “And this here is some wine made from the grapes of a neighboring village. It’s been aged almost eleven years. In recent years, it has not turned out very well. Please, give it a try.”

“…I appreciate it.”

Danny set a full goblet of wine in front of Kei.

This much was to be expected of that devious old man and his son. They weren’t overly pushy and managed to avoid creating an awkward atmosphere; truly splendid coordination between them. It gave off the impression that they were used to entertaining guests. Treating someone who showed up suddenly this late at night as skillfully as they have made it feel as if they had a great deal of practice.

…Although, I wonder if it will be alright if I drink this.

Kei involuntarily picked up the goblet and hesitated for a single moment, gazing at the red liquid as it swirled around inside.

The only alcohol that Kei had ever consumed was limited to amazake[1].

…Well, I’ve had drinks in game before, and with this body it should be fine.

No matter how much he pretended to enjoy the smell it would be strange if he didn’t drink it. Suddenly, he drank with determination. The sourness of the grapes and the taste of alcohol spread through his mouth.

“…”

“How is it?”

Danny and Bennett watched Kei with their heads slightly inclined. They certainly didn’t look alike, however, seeing their smiles made him think they were father and son after all.

“…It tastes very nice, it’s easy to drink.”

“Is that so? I’m glad to hear it.”

They seemed to be relieved by Kei's answer, but this was probably an act as well. Danny and the village mayor exchanged glances.

That was close, I almost choked there.

The alcohol content of the wine was quite low, but the fact that he wasn't used to alcohol hadn't changed. He felt like gagging.

He was somehow able to get used to it as he rolled it around in his mouth, so drinking it little by little was fine, but he couldn't drink it like a cup of juice.

"If you try some after the meat, the flavor will change." Bennett smoothly placed generous pieces of meat in front of Kei.

Since coming to this world, he still hadn't eaten anything; he'd only had water, a healing potion, and wine. Now aware of his hunger, he gratefully picked up a piece of meat.

"Ohh, this is…"

The good, concentrated flavor of the pork with a perfect amount fat danced on his tongue as the smoky smell tickled his nose. It was a little too salty, but then, if he drank a little wine at the same time, the flavor really did change, just as Bennett suggested. Using the alcohol to wash down the rather strong flavor of the fat left in his mouth was satisfying!

Something that VR technology couldn't replicate; the real sense of taste.

After having been able to savor something he hadn't in a long time, he felt emotionally moved as he smacked his lips.

"…Hey, mayor," a deep voice reverberated next to the relaxed Kei. "I want to ask something… Why did you call me for this?" The good looking man, Mandel, inquired as he faced the village mayor and sleepily rubbed his eyes.

"__"

A brief moment of silence. Kei felt feeble bloodlust from the smiling Bennett who held a knife in his hand.

"…What, from what I heard, Kei-dono was attacked by thieves. Also, it seems it happened not too far from here. You're the most skilled fighter in the village, so just to be sure, I wanted you to be a part of our talks."

"…I see." Satisfied with his answer, Mandel, still wearing a sleepy expression, proceeded to glance over at the meat in front of Kei. "I'm hungry. Do you mind if I have some too… Kei-dono?"

"Sure, I don't mind. Also, you can just call me Kei."

"…Thanks."

The two ate their fill of smoked meat. Eating by himself felt awkward, so Kei welcomed Mandel. Mandel seemed untroubled with joining in.

"Hm… This certainly makes me want to drink," was the first thing to come out of his mouth after wolfing down the meat.

Danny pressed on his brow as if he had a headache, and next to him the corners of

Bennett's never-changing smile twitched.

Bennett ignored Mandel magnificently and asked, "Well… now, would you mind sharing with us the story of these thieves, Kei-dono?"

"Of course, but I ran away immediately so I don't have too many details."

Kei took sips of the wine as he summarized the attack. The place, their numbers, and their equipment and proficiency.

"…'Hound Wolf'?"

Everyone present listened quietly, but once Kei mentioned that a tamed wolf had chased him, the color drained from their faces.

"…Ah. I killed two of them. One got lucky but its nose was crushed, so I don't think it came all the way to the village."

Kei assumed that they were afraid of their tracking ability with their sense of smell, so he tried to alleviate their fears, but the faces of the mayor and his son remained dark. Even Mandel stopped eating and wore a serious expression.

It feels like I stepped on a landmine.

The atmosphere around them had become heavy.

"Is something wrong with the Hound Wolves?"

"N-no… taming them is difficult; if a band of thieves used them, well, that means… right?"

Bennett and Danny exchanged looks wearing awkward smiles as if saying, you understand, right?

Even if you look at me like that…

I don't understand, I don't know.

Kei honestly had no idea. He'd only arrived in this world mere hours ago. There's no way that he would know about the thieves or other circumstances.

"…『The Ignaz Thieves』," whispered Mandel in a low voice with his arms crossed.

"…"

"Certainly, you must know of them?"

He hesitated, trying to decide between pretending to know and outright asking about them, but Bennett saw through him.

"It's embarrassing, but I've never heard of them."

"What…"

"That…"

Taken aback, the father and son looked at each other.

"The Ignaz Thieves are a large group that operates out of the center of Ri'leir. As of late, they've been quieter but… even so, their reach is huge. Even now, they seem to have their

hands on some feudal lords… Around here, there isn't anyone that doesn't know them," Mandel quietly explained with a serious expression.

The question, where did you come from, was vaguely implied, but Bennett and Danny couldn't read between the lines and wore baffled expressions. It was obvious from the faint bloodlust being directed at Mandel that they didn't appreciate being left out of the conversation like this. The fact that they managed to keep their expressions neutral in spite of this was impressive.

That aside, something bothered Kei. "This area is Ri'leir?"

Mandel made a strange face at his question, but nodded an affirmative.

The Ri'leir area.

In the game, that referred to the entire southwestern region of the map.

It encompassed the plains, the meadows, the hills, the woods, and other such abundantly green terrain, the stronghold Urvan, the port city Kitene, and other important grounds for activity. It could even be said to be Kei's home.

"…Village mayor. I apologize for asking something strange, but…"

"Yes…?"

"Could you please tell me the name of a large town near here?"

"Town, huh?" Bennett folded him arms and exhaled audibly in thought.

Danny raised a finger and answered in his place, "Satyna, perhaps…"

As expected, Kei hadn't heard of it before. His face fell.

"And also, if you go north, there is Urvan."

"Urvan!?" Kei's reaction to Bennett's latter words was quite the opposite. The other three tensed up in shock at Kei's loud voice.

"Ah, excuse me, I lost my composure. Urvan… it's a stronghold—", he was about to say 'village', but stopped himself because something felt odd. …I thought I asked them to tell me of a large town.

In the game, Urvan was certainly large for a village constructed by players, but it was small when compared to the NPC towns that were in the game to begin with.

Danny nodded, "Yes."

"—It's the fortified city Urvan."

It took a few seconds for things to sink in.

"…Fortified city?"

"Yes, fortified city."

"…Not a stronghold village?"

Bennett and Danny both let out a laugh.

"Hahaha… That's quite amusing. If Urvan were a village then we would be something

like a dog house.”

“No, seriously. It would be absurd to compare our size and population to theirs.”

The two of them waved their hands back and forth as if to say, no, no.

It seemed that, unlike the game, Urvan’s scope had changed to that of a city.

Kei rocked the goblet back and forth as he thought. If Urvan exists then that means—

“In that case, if you head straight west there is a port town called Kitene, right?”

“Yes. You are aware of ‘Port City Kitene’, Kei-dono? I’ve only visited it a few times, but it was a good city. Especially the pleasure quarter.” Danny made a lewd expression and he gave a dirty chuckle.

Kei quickly looked away from the plump man’s disgusting smile. “Village mayor, if it’s not too much trouble, could you show me a map of the area?”

“A map… Please wait one moment.” Bennett stood up with a grunt, picked up the candlestick on the table, and disappeared to the far end of the room. “…Unfortunately, we only have a roughly sketched one.”

“That’s fine.”

Kei took the parchment from Bennett and spread it out over the table.

“…I see.”

It certainly was a rough one.

It must have been sketched quite some time ago. With Tahfu as the center of the map, roughly sketched topological features were drawn of the surrounding area. Also, various locations such as castles and houses were marked throughout the map.

“To the east of here is Satyna, huh. The castle in the north is Urvan, and the port in the west is Kitene… This house mark here is a nearby village?”

“Yes.”

“…How far is it? A rough idea is fine.”

“About… huh. It probably wouldn’t take more than half a day to walk to the town of Satyna in the east. Kitene is double the distance so it would take a full day.

“Hm…I see. Thank you.” Kei once again dropped his gaze to the map.

If it took half a day to walk from Tahfu to Satyna and a full day to Kitene, then after taking into consideration various towns and their distances, walking to Urvan, which was kind of far to the north, should take around three days.

Of course, since there are obstacles such as mountains, valleys, and forests on the way, it would take a little extra time to actually get there.

He measured the distance between the fortified city Urvan and the port city Kitene on the map.

“It looks like walking from Urvan to Kitene should take about three or four days.”

“According to the map, yes, it would.”

“This is just what I was told by a peddler’s bodyguard but, according to him, it would only take half a day by horse if you galloped,” Danny butted in after coming back to his senses.

The necessary time to travel between Urvan and Kitene by horse was exactly what Kei wanted to know the most.

“I see, thank you.” While rubbing his chin he thought to himself, the scale of things certainly are larger than when this was a game…

A stronghold village became a fortified city, a port town became a port city, and a thirty minute journey by horse became a half day journey.

The interesting thing about travelling by horse is that, just because the travelling time was twenty-four times longer, doesn’t necessarily mean that the map became twenty-four times larger.

A large gap in travel potential appears between a horse and an automobile since the horse cannot maintain its top speed for long periods of time.

In the game, to speak to a bowser horse’s performance, Mikazuki and Sasuke were able to continue galloping at a regular horse’s pace for thirty minutes nonstop. The fastest a regular horse can gallop is 30KPH. Therefore in the game, the actual distance between Urvan and Kitene was a little less than fifteen kilometers.

However, no horse, even a bowser horse, can maintain a gallop for an entire half day. They need breaks and slower speeds at times in order to maintain a decent pace. Taking such impediments into consideration, the distance between Urvan and Kitene in this world is slightly over 150 kilometers.

In other words, the scale of this world was most likely tenfold that of the game world.

If the 『Demondal』 map expanded tenfold…then this place is probably, at most, the size of the British Isles?

The British Isles. It was difficult for a horse to go across that vast land, but even then, from the perspective of it being the wholeworld it was much too small.

If this place is a parallel world that appears similar to 『Demondal』, then areas which had been out of bounds due to limits imposed by the game, should now be accessible. Even the ocean and places behind mountain ranges.

“…” Hesitant to say anything to Kei who had kept silent and wore a worried expression, the room remained silent.

Kei thought to himself things such as, Once Aileen recovers, first we ought to head over to the scaled up Urvan to check it out…

“__“

He snapped his head up after hearing a faint voice from outside, “…Someone’s coming.”

Mandel and Kei both noticed it at the same time and turned their attention to the door behind them.

They could hear the light sound of someone’s footsteps as they half ran toward the village leader’s house.

“—Pardon me!” The door was roughly shoved open and crashed into the wall with a loud bang.

Just outside, a young, freckled girl with an ashen face stood breathing heavily.

“Tina, why are you in such a panic?”

“Mayor! There’s a huge problem!” She shouted hysterically in response to Bennett, before suddenly turning to Kei, “Traveler! It’s bad, please come quickly!! Right now!” Looking as if she was about to cry, she tried to forcefully pull Kei outside by the sleeve.

“W-wait a second, Tina! Just what is going on?!” Roared Bennett.

The frantic girl paused for a moment to say, “The girl he brought with him, Aileen-sama…” she timidly looked at Kei, “She—she isn’t breathing!”

† † †

Kei felt the color drain from his face and broke into a run. “Aileen!” He smashed into the small room, shoving the door open with a bang.

Inside were two people. Aileen, laying on a small bed, and Cronen, looking flustered and shaken up in front of her.

“Move!!” He violently shoved the confused Cronen away and rushed to Aileen. “Aileen…! Hey, pull yourself together, Aileen!”

He lightly hit her cheeks, but there was no response. He held his hand in front of her mouth, but he didn’t feel her breath.

Now bathed in the warm candle light, Aileen’s face was paper white. It felt unpleasant; she looked just like a doll. He smacked her chest with his hand.

It can’t be. Why. Her face didn’t look good, but the wound should already be completely healed, “—Fuck!!”

He pressed his ear to the left side of her chest. “…” No sound… no. Bathump, it was a beat so small it seemed as if it would disappear at any moment.

“She’s still alive…!” He felt around in her waist pouch and pulled out a small potion. Calming his impatient, shaking hands, he removed the cork and poured it into her mouth.

After a few seconds, “…Kehu!” Aileen grimaced and moved slightly, choking on the liquid. Her cheeks turned a faint red once again.

“Wha-, she revived…!?” Croaked an astonished voice from Cronen, who looked as if he’d just seen a miracle of God.

Kei turned, piercing him with a sharp glare. “…You bastard, what did you do?”

Kei’s voice carried a penetrating cold that felt as if it came from the depths of hell; the air itself seemed to crackle with his bloodlust. Cronen began trembling and fearfully stammered, “I-I didn’t do anything!!”

In reality, he really didn’t do anything; either to hurt her or to help her.

“I-I just, she was sweating so, you know, she had a fever too, I was trying to bring it down with a wet cloth…” He showed Kei the small wet towel in his hand. Flustered, Cronen continued, “It w-was really only a short time! She didn’t look too good to begin with, but after stepping away for a moment she got weaker and weaker… By the time Tina left to call for you her breathing was already almost…”

Kei regained some composure after witnessing Cronen’s dismay, and while giving Aileen more potion he reconsidered the situation,it looks like he didn’t do anything bad to her.

“…Sorry. I got a little upset.”

“No, it’s fine if you understand…”

Relieved from the pressure of Kei's bloodlust, Cronen sighed and relaxed.

…Regardless, why did this happen?

Involuntarily, Kei bit into his lower lip. Her complexion was returning but sweat began to bead up on her forehead again causing doubts to well up once more.

Her wound healed completely. That's for sure.

He reached into his quiver and pulled out the arrow she'd been hit with to examine it. There was no way that the arrowhead broke off and was still inside her.

Maybe she needs more potions? No, drinking one bottle should restore full HP. Driving one to the verge of death, even after fully healing—

—Driving one to the verge of death.

Kei suddenly raised his head to stare at the assailant's arrow clenched in his right hand.

"—Really now, just what is going on this late at night?"

"—Sorry, but it is what it is."

Outside had suddenly become noisy.

The door squeaked open and an old woman wearing a robe and holding a cane came in. "Really, a traveler, how botherso—Hiieeiieiieee!!!"

As soon as the old woman who had been complaining walked in and met Kei's gaze, she lost her balance, and fell over backwards.

"Anka-san, what's wrong?!"

"N-nothing, this…" Ignoring the panicking Cronen who rushed to her side, she opened her eyes and a look of fright appeared on her wrinkled face.

"What's wrong, old woman?" Bennett came into the room just after her, looking slightly worn out.

"T-they are the travelers, Bennett?"

"Yes, yes… Kei-dono, this old woman is our village's shaman."

"Heheheh, shaman is a bit of an overstatement, I just specialize in curses. My name is Anka, I am pleased to make your acquaintance…traveler." The old shaman woman shakily stood up with Cronen's help, and unsteadily approached the bed. "…What in the world happened to this young girl?"

"Well…" Cronen described the situation roughly.

"Hm…traveler, do you have any insight on this?"

"…A little while ago she was shot by a thief's arrow." He handed the arrow to the old woman.

"This… However, I don't see any trace of a wound…"

"It was here." Kei indicated Aileen's chest to the old woman, who looked perplexed as she gently brushed the arrow. There was new, white skin left as a scar from using the potion to

heal her. “I used this to heal her.”

“That’s…!?”

The bottle he held still contained a small amount of the blue liquid. Anka gasped, transfixed by the sight.

“It seems you’re familiar with it. It’s a High Potion.”

“A High Potion!!” Anka loudly parroted back at him and once again weakly fell to the floor. “…Please don’t startle me so, traveler. I thought my heart was going to stop.”

“O-oh, sorry…”

Aileen’s complexion worsened slightly, without a moment’s delay he dribbled more of the potion into her mouth as he thought to himself that a High Potion wasn’t something to be that surprised about.

Almost in a moan Anka said, “Although, this arrow and these symptoms…” She wiped some of the sweat off of Aileen’s forehead and put it in her mouth. “…Bitter. It seems pretty likely it was the Ignaz… I see.” She suddenly turned her attention to Kei, “This traveler,” correcting herself, “This girl’s condition…I believe the arrow was poisoned.”

Vermillion - Chapter 9

9. Encounter

The wind blew fiercely.

The nighttime grassy plains.

The new moon’s sky.

A world painted with darkness.

Slowly, a single male figure appeared.

His face hidden with a cloth, and a vermillion bow in hand.

Rocking atop his horse, he simply looked forward.

His eyes held a bizarre glow.

And yet, like a phantom, his presence was almost entirely undetectable.

Pulling on the reins he brought the horse to a stop and muttered, “…Found you.”

At the end of the field, in the shadow of an egg-shaped rock, an orange light flickered and waved.

Firelight.

Someone was camping out there.

Right where they were attacked not too long ago.

He didn’t even need to think of who it could be.

It was them.

The band of thieves that shot Aileen.

Silently, he pulled an arrow from his quiver.

Reading the wind, he determined they were downwind.

He lightly kicked the horse’s sides and it began to silently walk forward once again.

Slowly, under the cover of night.

Catching his breath, he advanced into the grassy plain with an arrow nocked on his bow.

† † †

The fire spit as a twig popped inside it.

In the shadow of the egg-shaped rock, near the campfire, the members of Ignaz carelessly

rested in their black leather armor.

One basking in the warmth of the fire; one laying atop a cloak spread out on the ground; one munching on a hard biscuit; one leaning against the rock and keeping watch—

Except for the one keeping watch, they were all completely relaxed. In the cool breeze under the new moon's sky, the thieves wore expressions without a hint of enthusiasm—they appeared sleepy and absentminded.

To put it shortly, they looked devoid of spirit.

"Haaah," the skinny man sitting on top of the rock in front of the fire let out a big sigh.

A gloomy man. Out of the entire group he appeared to be the most lifeless. He may not have been getting proper nourishment, or maybe he was just always like that. His sunken cheeks and eyes gave his face the appearance of a skull. His long, unkempt hair, coupled with the shadow cast by the dim fire created an atmosphere that could only be called depressing.

A grave keeper would suit him much better than a thief. His name was Morissette, and he was the leader of the nine others in Ignaz's combat group. "Haah…" Morissette sighed again while roasting some skewered meat over the campfire.

The image of fat-dripping meat sizzling over the campfire reflected in his glazed eyes. Once it was cooked decently, he flipped it over and thoroughly cooked the other side.

"…Hey, Morissette," drawled the plump underling sitting cross-legged on the other side of the fire.

"What?" asked Morissette, only glancing at him.

"Not much… Just thinking it would be a waste if you cooked all the fat away…"

"This is fine, it's a luxury," replied Morissette while staring at the meat losing its fat. "I like meat with the least amount of fat best."

"…The way you're doing it, the meat will dry up you know?"

"For me, that's when it's just right."

"Such a waaaste! That's exactly why you're always just skin and bones," whined the plump underling as he threw his hands up.

"I don't care. It doesn't matter to me," Morissette bluntly retorted.

During their chat, the meat became very well done. Pulling the meat back from over the fire, he took a large bite.

"…Ahh, I'm hungry. Morissette, give me a piece too."

"Sorry, this is the last of it."

"Aah…then, just one bite—"

Before the underling could finish talking, Morissette opened his mouth wide and shoved the rest of the meat in.

"Aaaahhh!"

“Even if you look at me like that, the meat isn’t coming back,” he said while chewing.

“Damn. That’s not fair.”

“…Hey, Rat. We divided up the food evenly. Where’s your food?” Morissette glared at the underling, Rat.

Looking around enviously, Rat called out to the other thieves, “Hey, anyone have some meat, any meat?”

“Sorry, already ate it.”

“I’m all out too.”

“I have some biscuits if you want.”

Hearing his companions’ responses, Rat let out a heavy sigh. “Everyone is so mean…”

“There’s no helping it, our prey got away…”

Morissette and Rat looked at each other again; dejected, they sighed.

It was only a few hours ago.

Morissette and his group were laying low and setting up camp in the grassy plains. However, one of his subordinates spotted travelers carelessly lighting a fire at the foot of the mountain. With just that, they launched an attack.

Purposely lighting a fire in plain sight on the night of a new moon was practically saying, “Please come get me!”

Morissette’s group’s food stock was just getting low too. As bandits, they couldn’t possibly overlook this.

Their prey was two people. They were a strange pair. A blonde—and good looking at that—girl, fully clad in foreign style black clothing, and a boy who appeared to be a person of the grassy plains. Neither of the two stood watch; they just warmed themselves by the bright fire. They were offering themselves up on a silver platter.

Morissette’s group had ten members. They began to encircle the camp. After loosing an arrow their prey would have nowhere to escape—should have had nowhere to escape.

“…To think that Morissette would fail.”

“Fail…huh.” Hearing Rat’s frank words Morissette made an unpleasant face.

The first one who attacked, the person who first shot at the boy, was none other than Morissette. Being a person of the grassy plains himself, he was the most proficient bow user in the group. Even trained in suppressing his bloodlust, he was proud of never letting his ability with a bow fall behind any of his subordinates.

However.

“That bastard, dodging it.”

The very moment Morissette released the arrow, the boy instinctively twisted his body and avoided the arrow’s trajectory. He didn’t sense the arrow flying toward him, rather, he felt the miniscule bloodlust that leaked when Morissette attacked.

“Sensing Morissette’s arrow at that distance…wasn’t a fluke, huh…”

“He probably knew it was coming and dodged. Since when I aimed at the girl she didn’t move…”

Morissette wore a sullen expression while rubbing his chin. Even for a seasoned warrior, reflexively dodging while unprepared was difficult. “Even so, if that bastard could sense my arrow it would have been better if he just covered for the girl. Then we wouldn’t have killed her and we would’ve finished him off. It would’ve been an honorable death…”

Deeming it difficult to hit the boy after seeing him dodge his arrow, Morissette changed targets to the girl for his second arrow.

The boy was of no use, so originally, the plan was to kill him right away and then everyone would take their time and have fun with the girl—but Morissette placed stealing their supplies over leaving her alive for their entertainment.

However, their plan fell short. Even while burdened by the wounded girl, the boy not only penetrated their encirclement, but also repelled the pursuit of three hound wolves; he succeeded in a remarkable escape.

Morissette pressed his hands to his temple. “Ha… On top of our prey escaping, they killed two of our precious Hound Wolves and the last one is useless… Exactly what am I supposed to tell the leader…” He sprawled out in the shadow of the rock with a displeased expression and looked at the sole surviving Hound Wolf. “Damn it, next time I see that bastard I’ll make sure I kill him.”

Morissette once again started to produce a melancholic aura around him, and in front of him Rat gave a small shrug and said, “…Well, it can’t be helped if you feel guilty. A~ah, but it was a waste killing that girl, you know.”

One of the subordinates laying down had a vexed atmosphere around him and quietly complained, “You said it. She was quite a gem.”

“That looong blonde hair… She looked like an aristocrat.”

“Surprisingly, she was probably a ninja.”

Some of the other subordinates cut in.

“Well, not like she’s alive anymore though…”

“She did get poisoned.”

“I’d have fun with her even if she is dead. If we search the area we might find her body.”

“Her body, huh…”

“I wouldn’t be able to keep it up for a dead body.”

“Normally, I wouldn’t do it, but she’s such a beauty that I probably could. She’s like a doll.”

“Whether she’s a beauty or ugly, if there’s a hole it’s all the same.”

“But after a day it’s a bit dicey, isn’t it? She’d get all hard…”

The men were gossiping with smiles on their faces, chatting and egging each other on.

I suppose it's almost time we get out of here, Morissette thought to himself as he watched his subordinates.

Thinking back, over the past several weeks they crossed through the Ri'leir area, avoiding all possible contact with those outside of their group. Everyone, including himself, was thirsty for a woman. They weren't bad men; that's just the kind of people they were. He didn't think that they would run wild from this amount, but leaving it built up wasn't favorable.

I thought that we could have resolved that this time as well… Morissette let out a long sigh. Their lust was left unsatiated, they didn't get even a single copper, let alone food, and instead they lost two Hound Wolves.

The leader is gonna wring me out on this one…

The Ingaz leader's slogan is 'If you're in the bandit business get results, not losses.'

In all honesty, Morissette didn't even consider the pain and sacrifices they could end up with from just a young girl and boy.

…We failed because I attacked alone, didn't we? He was reflecting on why they failed. I should've just had all those with bows aim for that bastard. Not wanting to cause the leather armor clad boy any unnecessary pain, he attacked by himself and failed.

Counting himself, there were four members in his group that had bows. If the four of them were noticed while aiming and shot, even that boy wouldn't have been able to dodge them all. And even if only one grazed him, the poison smeared onto the arrowheads would have rendered him helpless.

If it had been a stupid man, then he believed—no, he was certain that he alone would have been enough to take him down.

Overconfidence sure is painful… A small smile crept onto his face. He looked up and blew out a long breath of air.

It was no longer a sigh. He finished his reflection with a resolution to be more careful and use everything he had to kill, next time.

Morissette's mood had changed and he clapped his hands a couple times. He was about to stop his subordinates' indecent conversation, "Alright. You guys, it's ti—"

A dry twang rang out.

Morissette and his group wore puzzled expressions, and there was a thick sounding, "Oomf". One of the men on watch violently spasmed with a strangely wet sounding voice.

Looking at the panicked man, Morissette's jaw dropped in shock and he asked him, "Hey, what—"

The man who was on watch was leaning against the large rock, now with a black-feathered arrow through his head and in spasms like a broken mechanical doll. No, it didn't simply stop there. It went clean through his skull and even pierced into the rock behind him. He was, quite literally, attached to the stone.

“Hey…”

Instant death. Unbelievable power.

Something like an arrow piercing a rock.

Even a ballista couldn’t do it this easily…

Caught up in his confused thoughts, another twang sounded out.

“—It’s coming!”

Coming back to their senses, everyone ducked before Morissette could even finish speaking. But even with that level of speed, it didn’t matter. One of the men, still ducking, was hit by the merciless arrow in the torso.

“Guagh!”

There was the sound of meat tearing and bone breaking into pieces.

The man with the broken spine limply twisted in ways he shouldn’t have been able to, and vomited blood as he collapsed to the ground. Still breathing, blackish-red blood bubbled at the corners of the man’s mouth, but Morissette immediately decided that he was beyond saving and abandoned him.

Quickly, Morissette picked up the bow and quiver at his feet.

“Get behind the rock! Take cover!” ordered Morissette.

The men quickly moved behind the rock. It was at most ten steps away from the various places the men were resting at. However, in that time there were another two twangs from behind and two corresponding thuds.

The man right behind Morissette took an arrow through the nape of his neck. Blood gushed like a fountain from where the muscle was ripped to shreds. Morissette’s back was drenched in the blood, but he slid behind the rock without so much as a glance backward.

“Shit, what the hell!?” After scarcely avoiding death, successfully hidden behind the rock, Morissette breathed deeply, and then as if his whole body remembered, he felt cold sweat break out all over.

The sole surviving hound wolf moaned from the other end of the rock and came up to rub against Morissette. While roughly stroking its unkempt fur, Morissette desperately tried to calm his wild breathing.

“Leader, what was that just now!?”

“How should I know!” he spat at the still young, pale-faced subordinate.

He glanced over everyone who was huddled up in the shadow of the rock just like him, and counted. Six people escaped unharmed.

Six people.

He killed Jack, Holly, Greg, and Nahum! He held down a groan underneath his expressionless face.

It had only been some ten-odd seconds since the one on watch, Nahum, was first shot. In

the short time it took to hide behind the rock, almost half their number had been hit by arrows. The wounds they received were completely devastating.

“Morissette, isn’t this kind of bad?” Rat whispered in a low voice, still with the same dumb, absentminded expression as he pulled a short sword out of the scabbard on his waist.

“Yeah…” While feeling the weight of Rat’s words, he poked his head out to check the surroundings.

Twang.

Morissette pulled back his head in a panic, and a white feathered arrow grazed his nose. Practically bending over backwards, he fell down onto his butt. “That was close…” He was almost hit.

Overshooting the trembling Morissette, the arrow pierced the side of the rock face and shattered, unable to bear the impact.

“What insane power, that bow…”

“Yeah. However…” He nodded in agreement. Looking at the remains of the shattered arrow, cold sweat ran down his brow.

That bow had ridiculous power. That’s for sure.

As a pretty good bowman himself, Morissette clearly understood.

It penetrated their leather armor, which was by no means cheap, as if it were paper, and even pierced stone; ultimately, not even the arrow itself could withstand the force.

It was fearsome.

In addition, the wielder’s accuracy was unparalleled. This, too, was fearsome.

But, what Morissette felt was the most dangerous was, I can’t even sense the slightest amount of bloodlust.

It had nothing to do with the powerful bow, nor the arrows that would steal one’s life away with certainty.

He couldn’t sense any bloodlust.

This meant that compared to Morissette, this archer vastly surpassed him in using 『Stealth Sense』.

Because of the new moon’s darkness, he couldn’t get a grasp on anything more than the approximate direction of where the arrow was shot from.

But he could be sure that, based on the time it took for the arrow to hit the rock from when he heard the twang, he was quite a distance away. Even with that distance he could shoot with pinpoint accuracy.

“Rat, did you feel any bloodlust?”

“No. I’m guessing you haven’t either?”

“No.”

“He’s a monster…”

“You said it. Who is it? Bandits?”

Replying to Morissette who wore a stiff smile, Rat did his best to speak clearly in his dopey voice, “No clue… though I think it’s only one person.”

Without much confidence Rat seemed to be suggesting the highly skilled archer may not be able to take all of them on at once. It was a grim idea, but Morissette’s intuition told him that the archer probably could take them all.

Damn it, we don’t even have anything worth being attacked over…!!

Nonetheless, they were like a filthy all-male household. If this guy has such great bowmanship, then there should be plenty of jobs for him besides thieving, Morissette thought angrily. But at that time, his eyes rested upon the shattered, white feathered arrow at his feet.

Perfectly white feathers.

…Wait a second, the first arrow that killed Nahum definitely had black feathers.

Making sure not to stick his head out, he looked at the other men who were hit by the assailant’s arrows. All of the arrows protruding from the corpses were also white feathered.

Black feathers…

His gaze was naturally drawn to his own quiver, held in his hand.

It was packed full with black feathered arrows.

“…You’ve got to be kidding.” Cold sweat broke on his brow once again.

A single black feathered arrow.

The grasslanders’ specialized weapon is a bow.

He surpassed Morissette in high level bloodlust related skills.

And tonight, at this place, he attacked Morissette and his group.

Putting it all together, there was only one possible conclusion.

“That asshole…!”

The young boy with a grasslander’s appearance.

I see. He would have more than enough of a reason to attack us—coming back to take revenge!!?

We picked the wrong guy to mess with. Morissette looked up at the sky.

***

However, Morissette mistook one particular thing.

The young boy with a grasslander’s appearance, Kei, was indeed the assailant, but revenge wasn’t why he was here. Much less, to kill all the bandits.

It was to find out what type of poison they used and then to immediately give Aileen the antidote.

Those were his only two goals, and frankly, he didn't care whether Morissette and his group died or not.

That's why he was in a hurry.

He silently crept up, and preemptively killed four of the bandits with his bow, but the others all hid behind the rock and away from his line of fire; they were panicked.

They were wasting valuable time.

Aileen's life left her as time went on, moment by moment. So Kei made his move.

Rather than waiting for them to try to formulate a plan to escape from behind the rock, Kei moved.

***

Morissette and the others were talking when they heard the rough sound of hooves from the other side of the rock. They raised their heads at the disturbance.

"Hey! Come out now!"

It was a young boy's voice.

"—I want to make a deal!!"

"…"

Morissette remained silent, considering it may be a trap he stuck his head out for a glance and pulled it back immediately.

It was only for a moment, but he definitely saw a young boy with a grasslander's appearance riding a horse. He had an arrow nocked, but didn't have it pointed at them. It looked like he didn't intend to use foul play.

No way, to think a horseman would approach us from over there… A small smile pulled at the corners of his mouth.

This is our chance.

At the very least, it's certain that it's only one person.

If he did have an ally, they could go to the other side of the rock and use a pincer attack. With his skill as an archer, he could easily pick them off. It was clear that he could have kept mercilessly shooting them down one at a time and leave none of them alive. In spite of that, he came and spoke to them, meaning that he had some sort of situation where he had no extra room to work—

Petting the hound wolf at his feet he shouted, "…Let's hear it!" He faced his subordinates and gestured instructions to them.

Silently they nodded, and he made sure they quietly began to prepare themselves. Slowly, Morissette stuck his head out from behind the rock.

While getting slightly irritated, he observed the young boy across from him. His face was

hidden with a cloth and only the area around his eyes was visible, but there was no doubt that he was one of the two travelers they had attacked earlier.

His black eyes held no expression—Morissette felt something cold creep up his spine.

"…You said something about a deal? What are you after?"

"Tell me the name of the poison you used. If you do, I'll let you live."

His demand was incredibly simple.

…I see, that girl must still be alive. Is that why he's in such a rush? Morissette was convinced. The poison was spreading and she was on the verge of death.

And now, since he came just to ask the name of the poison, he must be holding out hope for the antidote.

That aside, I'm pretty sure it was a lethal dose… Morissette thought to himself, she's lived quite a while after that. "If I tell you, you won't kill us, right?"

"…I'm exceedingly displeased right now. If you intend to put on airs and try my mood further then—"

"I got it, I'll tell you." He thought to himself, he's scary. Just like our leader. Behind the rock, where Kei couldn't see, he used his left hand to signal the others. "The poison we used—is the 'Enslavement Poison'."

…That was dangerous. It wasn't the 'Breath of Nightmares'. It's a good thing I didn't just try what I thought, thought Kei, relieved. However, for just a moment, he was distracted.

One would call it letting one's guard down.

"Go!!"

Morissette didn't overlook this one chance.

From the other side of the rock, a vicious black shadow darted out.

"Hound wolf!"

In a hurry, Kei tried to readied his bow, but three other bandits already had theirs readied and jumped out, and he froze.

The poisoned arrows—

Three archers. One hound wolf. And one person with a short spear, who followed after.

With a gruesome grin, Morissette pulled a long sword from the scabbard at his waist. He ordered his group, "Fire!"

The air whistled as they all loosed their arrows simultaneously.

Vermillion - Chapter 10

10. **Adversity**

They weren’t even ten steps ahead of him.

Three bandits aimed at him with poisoned arrows nocked and drawn.

—This would be rather difficult.

At a glance, Kei immediately comprehended the situation.

That’s what his combat experience told him; though it was from a game, he had a lot of it.

If it were just one person, then he would still be able to manage somehow, but three people shooting at once was different. He was much too close. There wasn’t enough time to turn Mikazuki and dodge; the arrows would be faster. In addition, a black hound wolf growled at him and bared its fangs. He didn’t have more than a few breaths left.

What to do?

If he tried to deal with the hound wolf then he’d be shot by the poisoned arrows.

On the other hand, if he tried to do something about the arrows, the hound wolf would tear his throat out.

What to do?

In the span of one extremely intense moment, Kei came up with the optimal solution.

The optimal solution.

In this situation, that was to get off his horse. It was quite logical, and moreover, a very game-like move.

“Fire!”

The man who seemed to be the leader of the bandits, Morissette, drew a long sword from a scabbard as he shouted the signal. The bowmen shot simultaneously.

At almost the same time, Kei wrapped the reins around his left hand, took his right foot out of the stirrup, and flattened himself against Mikazuki’s back as much as he could.

Mikazuki seemed pained due to Kei suddenly yanking the reins as he turned to the side. Matching his movements, Kei slid to Mikazuki’s left side, which covered him completely.

Kei used his favorite horse, Mikazuki, as a shield.

Originally, cavalrymen and their horses were two parts of a whole. Horses are a valuable thing as well. The bandits raised their voices in surprise as Kei used his precious ‘partner’ as a meat shield without any hesitation.

An arrow flew right through where Kei was not even a moment ago.

However, the other two arrows flew off target and sank mercilessly into Mikazuki’s torso. Whinnying, he writhed in pain. Thrown off of Mikazuki, Kei tumbled to the ground. He used safe falling techniques to counter the impact of hitting the soft ground and immediately stood back up. His leather cloak made a snap as it flapped behind him.

“You assholes.” Kei’s quiet, low voice oozed with rage. Beneath the cloth, baring his teeth like a beast, his blood seethed as he glared at the bandits with bloodshot eyes.

Heavy winds blew against them.

Morissette and his group unconsciously gasped as they were overwhelmed by the thick bloodlust that was exploding forth from Kei. Even the hound wolf that was ready to pounce at any moment, cowered with its fur standing on end.

But it was over in an instant.

In the blink of an eye, Kei quelled his intense bloodlust. Suddenly it vanished without a trace.

He calmly stood still, giving off no feelings; not anger, nor ambition, nor bloodlust. Morissette could only feel the vastness of the plains and the ground beneath his feet, it was almost as if Kei were a doll—

No, that’s not it!

Morissette, who held his longsword one-handed while squaring off against Kei, was shaking in his boots. A chill ran down his spine.

It was the feeling of being in danger.

Deep in his chest, he felt his sixth sense going off like an alarm, precisely because he couldn’t feel anything. He was witnessing something that transcended him…

Twang, twang.

From under the cloak, held up by the wind, came an instrumental duet. Suddenly, without warning.

Two flashes of silver—

“Du—“ Morissette was about to warn the others to duck, but he turned just in time to see the two bowmen get knocked back as their leather armor was pierced.

One had his forehead smashed open, the other had his shoulder demolished.

He practically span like a top in mid-air before he hit the ground. The bowman screamed as the impact broke the arrow, jamming it further into his shoulder, “—Gyaaaaaaahh!” He held his shoulder and rolled around on the ground writhing in agony, still not sure what even happened. Like leaves tossed around in the wind, or small fish swallowed up by a muddy current, they were powerless in the face of that overwhelming might.

…I couldn’t feel a thing, nothing at all.

Morissette’s mouth dried up. Sweat trickled down his brow.

Regardless of the archer right in front of him; regardless of the wind from the arrow flying right by him, he felt nothing.

Maybe, this was all just a dream or an illusion.

His 『Stealth Sense』 was formidable enough to even kill their sense of reality.

All he managed to grasp was that the boy readied his bow under his cloak, concealing both his action and his target, before taking two quick shots.

What a sneaky bastard…!

It was as if he was casually showing off his combat prowess as if it were acrobatics. Right now, Morissette didn’t have the time to spare to grieve or regret picking a fight with such an unbelievable man. Despite the cold, he felt sticky with sweat. He gripped his sword tightly.

I can’t let this guy use his bow.

His subordinates fell one by one with each twang he heard.

And then, the next one might be him.

“Uuuoooooh!” he yelled from his diaphragm as if shaking off his fear. At the same time he

held his longsword up and dashed.

Such an unexpectedly large voice boomed from his small body that even his petrified subordinates came back to their senses. Hurriedly the bowman nocked another arrow, and the spear user pressed forward. Then, the hound wolf with its fur standing on end rushed in headlong.

Just try and see if you can use that bow! Shouted Morissette in his mind with new hope. In this situation, if Kei were to use his bow then someone in his group would certainly fall victim. However, someone managed to reach him. He could no longer use his bow. It was hand to hand combat.

Kei himself recognized it as well. Especially with the hound wolf right in front of his face, even Kei wouldn't have been able to use his bow in this situation.

He made a split-second decision. Kei threw his bow to the ground with his left hand, and then with a shing, pulled a saber from the scabbard at his waist

It was a fine steel saber, like the one the 'Ninja' used. Kei held the saber and glared at the hound wolf, his blade dangerously reflecting the firelight.

I'm still at a disadvantage.

Kei grew stiff with nerves, his insides were squirming.

Enemies approached from the left, right, and center. In the back was the second archer that he shot. Right next to him was the fallen archer, shot by a poisoned arrow and unable to move. Behind Kei lay the endless plains, and therefore escape.

God damn it! Just because I'm running out of time! He felt an impulse to click his tongue.

On the other hand, Morissette picked up on Kei's impatience and smiled. We can do this!!

We're attacking. We're driving him into a corner. Along with the feeling of really succeeding came a dark pleasure.

In reality, Morissette's plan was very well done. Killing the cavalryman's horse, restricting him from using his preferred weapon, and making the best of their number advantage by bringing it to close combat.

Taking advantage of Kei's impatience and carelessness, and many of their own sacrifices, they finally broke through. Out of all their options, this could have been said to be the best possible outcome. Kei handled swords poorly.

—compared to his bow.

"Ohn, ohn!!" Barked the hound wolf as it bore its fangs and ran at Kei.

On the other hand, Kei, with only a tiny amount of bloodlust, raised his saber. His movements clearly showed that he was preparing for an attack. Naturally, the vigilant hound wolf's attention was also drawn to the sword.

Just before its nose, without the wolf sensing so much as a shred of killing intent, his right leg shot upward like an uppercut.

The hound wolf cried out pitifully and lost consciousness, while Kei mercilessly brought the saber down upon it. For some reason, with Kei's large stature his attack looked as if he were moving in slow motion. However, using his incredible strength, his attack was quick and unreasonably heavy.

His lighting fast saber struck the hound wolf in the head, smashing it with a thick crack. Its damaged brain went haywire and sent nerve impulses throughout its body, causing it to convulse as it was thrown down into the ground from the force of the blow.

Then, the archer loosed his second arrow at Kei, whose stance was broken. He was stumbling toward the bowman; it'd be extremely difficult to dodge an arrow in his situation. He didn't let the chance slip by and hit his mark.

However, Kei immediately sensed the bloodlust from the incoming arrow, and spun around on the spot. The arrow struck the spread out cloak.

It created a curtain of leather. Although, just a single thin layer of the protective leather would still be pierced by the poison coated arrow. But Kei tore off the cloak and tried to

deflect the arrow with his cloak's rotational force. While the arrow still plunged through the cloak, it lost some of its speed.

But even as Kei was doing a quick half-turn, the impromptu shot proved successful. There was a dull thud. The arrow stuck out from Kei's back, however the bulky part of his leather armor took the blow and stopped it without so much as leaving a scratch on Kei.

Kei quickly turned his head and gave the bowman a death stare. Before Kei's eyes the bowman started to shake, now realizing that his attack failed.

—The arrow had virtually no effect.

—I suppose I should have shot again.

—Or should I throw down my bow and use my sword too?

—Just when the hound wolf was taken out, I should have jumped in with my sword.

—But crossing swords with this monster is frightening.

The bowman stiffened and hesitated for just a moment. Kei's left arm lashed out like a whip, practically blurring from the elbow down.

In the darkness of the new moon, the bowman probably felt it coming. A lead pebble cutting through the night—

There was an unpleasant sound as the bowman's forehead sank into his skull. He bent over backwards, as if struck by lightning as both eyes rolled back into his head, and he let out a strange, "Koh!"

"What!?"

Noticing that the hound wolf and even the archer were taken out, Morissette turned his attention forward again. The other man wielding the short spear, however, never removed his eyes from Kei. Not even realizing that two of his allies were taken out, the spear wielder charged straight in. “Diiiee!!” He screamed as he thrust his sharp spear.

Kei, glaring at the spear wielder, answered with a side sweep of his saber. It clashed against the shaft of the spear with a shrillmetallic clank. His eyes opened wide when he saw the spear, which he struck with enough force to break, was left without so much as a scratch.

It was made of metal. The short spear wielder’s weapon was made entirely of a metallic alloy. Compared to a regular spear, it should have been much heavier. However, because the man handled it with ease and it was disguised with paint to look like wood, Kei never realized it.

Feeling Kei trembling, the spear wielder smirked and put more power behind his spear. He used overbearing force to push Kei’s saber back and realign his spear, and then thrust vigorously.

He believed in his brute strength method.

Except, at that very moment, he realized that was a poor move. Kei reinforced the flat of his saber with his other hand and forced him into a contest of strength with his extraordinary power.

“—Huoooh!?”

Feeling Kei’s abnormal strength, the spear wielder mustered all his strength in an attempt to push back the saber. But it wouldn’t move. It wouldn’t even budge. In fact, his spear was being pushed aside. That wasn’t the end of it either; in an instant, their roles were reversed.

Sparks flew with a grinding noise as the saber slid up the shaft of the spear. The edge of the blade was getting closer. The spear wielder, caught up in uncertainty, could only stare as it happened.

Kei pushed aside his defenses with all his strength and swiftly stepped in toward him, leaving only a short distance. Sliding up the spear shaft, the saber finally reached the spear

wielder’s hands and, naturally, his fingers were sent flying.

But the saber didn’t stop there. Before the fingers could even hit the ground, the saber forced its way between his legs, slicing the left femoral artery[1] on his inner thigh, causing blood to spurt out.

Even after that, the merciless sword dance continued on. Finally recognizing Kei’s speed, the spear wielder, his leg slashed, opened his mouth to scream as he fell to the ground. But, faster than he could squeeze out his voice, the saber flicked upward and caressed his neck. It was a fatal strike, severing his carotid artery.

A wet sound came from the man’s throat as his blood sprayed. Kei turned around without so much as a glance at the spear wielder as he powerlessly collapsed to the ground.

He took a stance, holding his saber in front of him. His movements were smooth; clearly the result of training rather than self-practice. In an instant, Kei had prepared to fight Morissette.

“Don’t…fuck with me—!!” Morissette shouted as he brandished his longsword, stirring into action.

The man killed just a moment ago was the strongest in his group. With his strength and long lasting stamina he could effortlessly wield his metal alloy spear. Morissette was proud of having him in the group.

Even so.

Morissette was caught up with his archers, and by the time he looked back again, the saber had already claimed its prey.

What’s more, beating him decisively.

Not only his bowmanship, but even his swordsmanship is first rate?!

What power he has.

This is absurd.

Why has such a young boy become so skilled—

“Fuuuck!!” Shouting angrily, Morissette brought his longsword down at Kei from overhead.

It was a straightforward attack of desperation. Not even needing to feel his bloodlust, Kei naturally reacted.

The saber moved to intercept the longsword that was approaching from above. The blow carried force with the intent of destroying the weapon rather than the defense.

A loud metallic clang resonated as sparks were sent flying in the darkness.

”Hgh!?”

The sharp impact when the two swords met nearly ripped Morissette’s longsword from his hands. Rather than locking swords, his longsword was just hit over and over again.

Shit! This isn’t how you’d use a saber!!

Morissette’s face became stiff as he switched his longsword to his left hand due to the numbness in his right arm. Sabers are a ‘Slashing’ weapon, yet this boy is using it entirely as a ‘Bashing’ weapon—Morissette stumbled backwards in retreat, and like a bird of prey, Kei kept the pressure or, closing to attack.

“Raaaaaah!!”
“Oooooohh!!” Yelling undauntedly back at Kei, Morissette swung his sword. If he were to poorly take a strike from Kei, he would inevitably lose to the difference in strength. Therefore, rather than defend, he attacked.

The saber hummed through the air as it approached, before clashing with Morissette’s longsword. Sparks flew once again, but since he was using his non-dominant left hand, the force of the blow redirected the longsword.

He was now defenseless. Kei stepped in to close the gap and swing his saber as he should have. However, Morissette thrust out his arm more quickly.

Suddenly feeling a sharp, stabbing bloodlust from the front, Kei whipped his head to the side as if he'd been slapped, and heard something brush against his mask.

Something black cut through the air right in front of his face. It was so small that even with his eyes Kei couldn't tell what it was before it flew away and disappeared in the dark, leaving behind only the sound of it cutting through the air.

"You really dodge that well, huh!" said Morissette with vexation as he gripped the sword in his right hand again. What flew by was a poisoned glass dart that came from the covering on the back of his right hand. It was a hidden, one-shot only weapon that used a strong spring to fire the dart, but it was effective in bringing certain death to human targets.

Kei, who excelled at Passive Sense, was able to avoid the unconventional attack—but even so, suddenly being shot at thoroughly broke his stance. Morissette kicked off the ground and boldly thrust his longsword forward.

"Haa!!" As he exhaled a short breath he aimed for Kei's chest and thrust the sharp sword. Using his left hand's bracer as a guide, he aimed for a small gap in Kei's leather armor; his throat.

"Guah!?" Let out Kei in an anguished voice as he used all his might to twist his body in order to evade the longsword. As if doing a backflip, Kei faced backwards and jumped. The steel edge of the sword sliced right in front of him. His left cheek stung as he felt something cold, yet warm. He threw himself to the grassy ground, and rolled away to gain some distance.

Without a moment's delay, Morissette moved to strike again, but Kei struck at his feet. While rolling away, he snapped up his wrist and attacked. It was random and meant to buy time, but for better or worse the saber lightly cut into Morissette's unprotected ankles. A small scream escaped Morissette and he took a step back. In that time, Kei got up and took up a stance again.

Covering his wounded ankle, Morissette took the initiative and again raised his sword to strike. However, seeing Kei prepared he rethought it and struck high, middle, low, thrust, and mixed in feints to test his moves. Kei adjusted his stance for each one.

However, Kei reacted immediately to them all and Morissette was unable to find an opening in his defenses.

Dammit, there isn't even a chance for me to slip through with my sword.

Morissette clicked his tongue as he tried to shuffle around and encircle Kei.

Predominately a bowman, even though Morissette had real combat experience, his swordsmanship was only at an average level. Nor did he have much physical strength, so he would lose easily if Kei were to come at him with brute force.

Kei's swordplay seemed to be a counter based style, so the blessing was that he wouldn't assertively attack, but the situation wouldn't change either. Even with that said, his only option, chipping away at Kei, also wasn't a good method for Morissette, since he had already used his trump card. Morissette had no other cards to play.

On the other hand, with his saber readied, Kei thought to himself, …He's better than I expected. If he's careful with his movements, he could handle me to some degree, amongst other things that would likely enrage Morissette if he heard them.

Kei's strength in 『Demondal』 was above that of most, but still less than that of some. He was stronger than most of the beginner and middle level players, but he wasn't even a match for the top level players.

His bow expertise earned him the name 'The Reaper'; his statuses, and masteries all fundamentally specialized him in shooting from horseback, but at the cost of it being difficult to show strength in any other area. On top of that, the game stressed the importance of player skill, and Kei wasn't blessed with amazing swordsmanship.

Now then, why is it that Kei can stand on equal, no, higher grounds than Morissette and his group?

There are two major reasons. The swordsmanship that Kei learned and the 『Vision Enhancement Crest』 engraved on his eye.

First, the swordsmanship that Kei used was nothing particularly special in 『Demondal』. It was simply a general purpose style for specialized players who used a sword as a

secondary weapon. Skills and abilities that automate the moves didn't exist in 『Demondal』, so players often studied swordplay or spearplay. Using martial arts from all ages and countries, players shared information on video hosting websites and refined the style logically, mathematically, and ergonomically through real combat, evolving it into a 'dirty' fighting style.

The heart, liver, other vitals, any artery, and a man's crotch were all targets. In some cases, dropping one's weapon and fighting hand-to-hand was considered 'swordplay' as well.

Kei's swordsmanship required that players with high strength stats use a sword as a secondary weapon. The basics of his life-reaping sword were that it focused on power rather than technique, while Kei sometimes aimed for vital and weak points on the defensive.

It was the basics of the basics of swordsmanship in the game, but Kei mastered it and gained tons of experience through countless battles with various top players, starting with Andrei the 'Ninja', who specialized in speed, agility, and abnormal maneuvers.

She practiced in every situation; one on one, skirmishes, one versus many, sword on sword, sword on spear, sword on axe, horseback, on foot, indoor, and outdoor. She had near limitless experience killing humanoids.

A swordsmanship devoted to rational calculations.

A swordsmanship of human engineering and knowledge that targeted all vitals.

A swordsmanship that, when practiced, could kill humanoids without hesitation.

In the game, Kei struggled with non-basic movements, as well as not holding any particular natural strength, but that didn't mean that he wasn't strong. In fact, one could say that he had the highest physical ability if he were on horseback, and moreover, he had his outstanding Passive Sense. When compared to an average player, his combat ability was astounding.

On the other side, how about Morissette and his group?

Morissette's swordsmanship was essentially self-taught. One could say it was because his main role wasn't a swordsman to begin with, but this wasn't limited to just Morissette; many of the swordsman in this world were self-taught to some degree.

There were those that studied under swordsmen who were better than themselves, but even those well-practiced swordsman rarely left the realm of self-teaching.

For argument's sake, even if there were a school that taught swordsmanship, they typically wouldn't want outsiders to learn their ways. It couldn't be helped, but the difference was simply that Morissette's group had to risk their lives in combat to develop their skills. Kei and Aileen did not.

In addition, the difference between Kei and Aileen's game avatar bodies in comparison to normal human bodies simply stood in their way.

In this world, like in 『Demondal』, life was much like the middle ages. Of course, those that grew up in this era, without being pampered by convenience, physically surpassed modern people. Especially those who lived by fighting, such as Morissette and his group, further surpassed the strength and stamina of ordinary people even in this world.

However, Kei was a prominent fighter among even the best in a similar style VRMMO.

A one-word description of his physical strength would be, ‘monstrous’.

Calling him inhuman would be an understatement.

Even though the short-spear wielder had superhuman strength in this world, Kei had easily killed him with his saber.

In addition to Kei’s abilities were several enhancement 『Crests』 engraved on his body.

This time, the 『Vision Enhancement』 crests engraved in each of his eyes especially, allowed him to perform this well against multiple enemies.

Even his horse, Mikazuki, had crests engraved in his eyes. Simply put, they enhanced all aspects of the bearer’s vision. Vision for both moving and unmoving objects, for both close up and far away, depth perception, etc… and of course night vision, the ability to see in the dark.

A new moon.

It was so dark that it was difficult to see even one inch ahead.

The only light came from the small camp fire.

While it wasn’t as bright as day for Kei’s eyes, he could see quite well. Well enough to be able to accurately count the wrinkles on the foreheads of the bandits in front of him.

Morissette and his group had to fight Kei in such darkness that they could barely make him out. The difference was obvious.

…This isn’t good. How should I go about this? Kei’s hands were wet with nervous sweat. While fixing his grip on his saber, he glared at the bandit—Morissette—in front of him.

The situation appeared to be entirely in Kei’s favor, however, in reality, not everything was working out for him.

There was no time.

Kei’s goal wasn’t to kill all of the bandits, it was to cure Aileen. He had to tell the village shaman, who had the antidotes, that it was 『Enslavement Poison』 right away. This wasn’t the time to fight with the likes of these bandits.

They were neither weak nor strong, but turning his back would still be far too dangerous. With that sort of opponent the only cost was time. Kei was utterly tired of it.

I really want to finish this up now…

He didn’t know what to do. While swaying his saber slowly from side to side, he checked his grip.

Kei may not even be a threat, since his swordsmanship wasn’t great. No matter how much

time passed, Kei's hesitation in attacking wasn't just because his swordsmanship was based on countering.

He held the saber in his right hand.

His fatigue was beginning to show.

…This isn't good, it's starting to deteriorate. After going through battle until now, the edge of the blade was damaged and the grip was starting to come apart from the blade. Matching the spear wielder's brute force was probably a bad idea. At this rate, he could only swing at full force three or four more times before the saber would either break, or separate from the grip and become useless.

Kei's swordsmanship was less focused on 'killing' than it was 'hacking'. He needed a heavier, more solid sword like a longsword or a scimitar.

But, the saber that Kei had was definitely a weapon for 'killing'. It was very sharp, but it lost to the longsword in durability. Of course it wouldn't last long in Kei's hands.

So then, why was Kei carrying a saber?

The answer was very simple. It belonged to the 'Ninja'.

Unlike Kei, Andrei specialized in agility and speed, and used the sharp blade to slash. However, no matter how good a saber user's technique is, there are times when it would break during a fight.

He used a saber so he could pass it off to Andrei at those times.

Whether it be a saber or a longsword, inside the game where warriors gather, if it came to hand to hand combat, Kei would lose instantly and the type of sword wouldn't matter. If someone who mained a bow had to rely on a sword, it was most likely their loss. In that case, it made more sense to provide Andrei a safety margin rather than have Kei carry a sword for himself.

That method was popular in the game, but it was coming back to bite him now.

Only the sound of the cold wind blowing could be heard as the two men stood with readied swords.

"…You're surprisingly young," quietly muttered Morissette, breaking the silence. He looked at Kei, whose cloth face covering was now removed.

A cut on Kei's left cheek bloodied his face. Filled with irritation, his strict face coupled with the harsh look in his eyes seemed to show an expression of fury. However, being of Asian descent, he had a boyish face and gave off the feeling of youthfulness.

"For a youngster like you to have come this far… I'm at a loss." Morissette continued on, but Kei didn't answer. In fact, he narrowed his eyes and glared at Morissette, further increasing his guard.

It was silent for another short while.

"…Hey, how about we call it off here?" Morissette carelessly said as he lowered his sword slightly and relaxed his muscles. Kei twitched and moved a little.

“…What?”

“I’m saying why don’t we stop fighting. We’re both running out of time, aren’t we?” He tilted his head a little.

In an instant, Kei felt the blood rush to his head. “…Don’t mess around. You’re one to talk after starting this.”

“This is hard on both of us. That’s the truth. Life is important even to me, I don’t want to waste time. Besides, aren’t we the same? Time is of the essence for our companions… am I wrong?” He smirked as he saw the impact of his words.

“…You should have just done this from the start.”

“I think so too. But—“

“I don’t plan on forgiving you,” Kei interrupted bluntly. “I told you in the beginning. Quickly tell me the name of the poison and you won’t die. Anything else and I’ll kill you.” He looked like he was going to say more, but dropped his gaze to the ground.

Laying out on the grassy plain, without even a twitch, was Mikazuki.

He’d taken two arrows loaded with poison.

Bowser horses have a much larger body than humans do, but as Mikazuki didn’t have any poison resistance, it was more than a lethal dose.

“I’m going to kill you.” Kei was once again filled with rage from the bottom of his heart. The atmosphere around him grew heavy.

“Hey, w-wait a sec.” Far from resolving the situation, Morissette evoked Kei’s wrath, and backed away in a hurry out of a lack of nerve.

Kei slowly raised his sword again and released a sudden torrent of bloodlust. In the short span of the battle, Morissette became well aware that the lack of Kei’s bloodlust was his bloodlust. It was at this time that Morissette seriously panicked and moved about hurriedly and said, “I’m sorry!” He threw his sword to the ground and prostrated himself. “I’m sorry! It was my fault! Please, forgive me!” His continued as his forehead met the ground, “I just lost myself a little! Please forgive me! I swear that I’ll never do it again! I’ll quit this business, I’ll never hold a sword again nor kill! Please just let me live, I don’t want to die…” The second half of his desperate pleas came through a sobbing voice as he curled up on the ground. He then continued to mutter, almost incoherently, “Please.”[1]

Kei looked at the pathetic figure and stopped. He felt as if his raging mind grew cold and lost its strength.

That feeling was bitter-sweet. Both reason and emotion screamed at him to kill the man in front of him. His anger was well justified. There were several reasons to rid himself of the man in his way; for his own protection, and in a sense, to save Aileen. And the fact that he had mercilessly killed the others. The fallen bandits in the area were dead. In his anger, he killed them.

On the other hand, the man in front of him right now…

If Morissette was still the bandit Kei was facing in a fight to the death earlier, Kei would

have killed him without hesitation. If not, he himself would have been killed. He wouldn't be able to save Aileen then. There wasn't any time to hesitate.

However, Morissette pathetically groveled at his feet, begging for his life. He was weak, awkward, and defenseless. Logically, he thought that killing him now would be the 'better' option, to save himself from any future anxiety. At this distance he could end it all faster than one could blink.

But even so, his sword didn't move.

—Maybe I don't need to go as far as killing him. Such thoughts floated across his mind along with a very unpleasant aftertaste.

Kei's bloodlust dulled.

"—like I said, so please!" Noticing Kei's hesitation, Morissette spoke up, "Just my life! Just let me live, please! R-right, in case you need it," he only moved his hand to feel around for something at his waist, "it's the antidote! The antidote for the 'Enslavement Poison', take it! I'm begging you! Take this and please, please—" As if presenting it, he held a small leather bag in the palm of his right hand.

—The antidote.

Kei's eyes were involuntarily drawn to the leather bag.

"—please, die for me."

Morissette's left arm moved quietly.

He quickly raised his head and threw grass and dirt in Kei's face.

"Wha-!" Kei winced from the dirt getting into his eyes. He was blinded. It was a cowardly tactic that didn't exist in the game, using sand or dirt, but it disturbed Kei. In that time, Morissette picked up his long sword. "You piece of shit!!" Kei bellowed, enraged from the pain particularly in his right eye, as he shed tears. Thinking about it, this is the second time he fell for Morissette's tricks. Showing mercy was the wrong choice. He should have killed him right away. Furious at himself for being weak and being deceived again he raised his saber without suppressing his bloodlust. "I'm going to kill you!"

"You're the one that's going to die, asshole!"

Morissette gripped his longsword tightly and thrust at the enraged Kei.

—He didn't know when to give up.

Giving into his anger he prepared to take it, however something felt out of place.

—Why is he coming at me with a stab?

It's too straightforward of an attack. Morissette most likely realized Kei can't use sword techniques. He noticed that Kei's sword was in poor condition.

Acting like he gave up and throwing dirt in Kei's eyes was more or less to buy time, but it didn't change the fact that he was still at a disadvantage. No matter what, it didn't feel right for Morissette, who repeatedly used underhanded tactics, to risk his life in a suicide attack.

Maybe he became serious. Maybe he truly fell into desperation. The tip of Kei’s sword swayed at the uncomfortable feeling. The bloodlust that Kei let out before dulled in his hesitation.

Perhaps that’s why.

Behind.

Very faint.

Bloodlust.

“—!” His body moved before he could even think. He instantly dove to the left. At roughly the same time, something struck him with a hard impact. He felt a searing pain in his right shoulder. “Guohh!”

In pain from the impact, Kei muffled a scream as he rolled on the grassy ground. He dodged reflexively after feeling the bloodlust, but he still didn’t understand.

What happened?

“A~ah. Looks like I failed this time.”

While trying to get up in the chaos Kei heard a voice.

He snapped his head up to see.

A short and stout figure clad in black clothes was there in the darkness.

A plump man that carried a short sword in both hands.

“I thought I had your neck, you know…”

He didn’t think it could have been dodged.

Morissette’s assassin, Rat, narrowed his eyes and readied his short sword.

TRANSLATOR’S NOTES

[1] Please: This is in English in the raw to serve as a reminder to readers that most of the conversation is actually in English.

Vermillion - Chapter 11.1

11. Equivalent Exchange

Staggering and trembling with pain, Kei held his shoulder with his left hand as he stood up.

The wound on his shoulder was incredibly painful.

He didn’t feel any numbness or abnormalities otherwise, so he probably wasn’t poisoned.

Thankfully, there wasn’t much blood, so his life didn’t seem to be in jeopardy.

However, his right arm was heavy and wouldn’t move.

“…An ambush, huh,” Kei forced out in between ragged, painful breaths.

—He was done in spectacularly.

With his face warped in pain, Kei looked at the skinny man (Morissette) and the plump man (Rat), and groaned.

Tactically, it was rather simple.

While Morissette and the others attacked Kei, Rat went around the other side of the boulder to get behind Kei and use a surprise attack.

Originally, Morissette never thought Rat would be of much use, but Rat had just saved him.

The ‘Missing’ Ratrand.

Despite his appearance, he was agile, he could move silently, and he could use Stealth Sense to erase his presence. Rat, a so-called ‘Fast Fatty’, specialized in ambushes by using these three abilities.

He had a reputation for his talent in stealth, especially, where even wild animals couldn’t sense his surprise attacks. If he had been able to use ranged weapons like a throwing knife or a bow and arrow effectively, then he’d probably be in line with Morissette as an assassin.

“You’re slow Rat, the hell were you doing!?” berated Morissette.

He yelled at Rat, the man who just saved him from his predicament.

Rat glanced over at Morissette with a look of sympathy and pity. “…You guys are just too fast,” Rat replied without getting agitated or disheartened. He furrowed his brow slightly at the heaps of fallen corpses around the area. “It hasn’t even been a full minute, ya know?”

Morissette scowled at his remark and held his tongue. Thinking back on it, Rat was right.

The fight with Kei was so intense that he could no longer tell just how much time had passed. In reality only an incredibly small amount of time had gone by.

“…You’re right.”

Morissette muttered a quiet ‘Sorry’ and took a deep breath as he closed his eyes and saw the faces of his dead subordinates.

Just one person.

They paid such a huge price for just one opponent.

“…This guy… He’s too strong,” Morissette whispered, annoyed.

This strange young boy that looked like a person of the grassy plains.

His bowmanship, his swordsmanship, and his strength were all on a different level. Morissette could only think of him as a monster.

—However, his shoulder was injured and he couldn’t wield his weapon properly.

For the harsh losses they took, at least this much damage should be expected, Morissette thought.

Up to this point, in their line of work, Morissette and Rat victimized countless merchants’ caravan guards with their surprise attack.

However, Rat preferred to not use poisons due to a strong fear of poisoning himself.

As far as Morissette could remember, it had been a number of years since Rat’s first strike was dodged. He probably hadn’t used any poison this time either. But, even if he hadn’t killed Kei, his dominant arm was useless. That alone was enough of an advantage.

The sad part was that even if they killed Kei and took his belongings, it wouldn’t amount to much for the hefty price they’d paid.

—Simply killing Kei wouldn’t be enough to satisfy him anymore.

For his subordinates’ revenge and to satisfy his own anger, he decided to kill Kei as painfully as possible.

After finishing his silent prayer for his subordinates, he turned to sneer at his unsightly enemy. Now for the first step.

At that moment, he noticed a sound like meat frying on metal.

“Itteeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!!!!!!![1]”

Japanese. Screaming.

It was a scream with all of one’s strength, strong and loud enough to shake the very air. In front of Morissette, Kei screamed as something like white vapor vigorously rose from his right shoulder.

Naturally, both Morissette’s and Rat’s jaws dropped and eyes widened at the sudden situation.

Kei was oblivious to them as he spasmed and trembled, screaming in extreme pain. But such words couldn’t even begin to describe how it felt.

It was as if salt was rubbed into his wound and each cell was popped by a needle one by one.

It felt like his flesh was being bored out by a file, ground up, and then his nerves were being pulled out by red hot tongs.

His anger, his hatred, and his impatience were all blown far, far away. He roared. It was painful enough to make his vision go white.

In Kei’s left hand was an empty glass bottle.

It was a High Potion.

It was the remaining portion of when Aileen cut her own hand to test the effects since arriving here and setting up camp.

While Morissette and Rat had been conversing, Kei reached into his pouch, pulled out the bottle and dumped it all on his shoulder.

Using potions to recover during odd moments was common among some of the top players. However, the already scarce potions in the game were even scarcer in this world. The fact that Morissette and Rat’s attitudes became so confident after his shoulder was

wounded proved it.

“Guuooooooaaahhhh!”

The refreshing sound of fizzing played like background music as Kei stood wailing dauntingly without even wiping at the tears welling in his eyes.

Morissette and Rat had no clue just what the vapor that rose from Kei’s shoulder was. Perhaps if they had better night vision they could have seen the wound on Kei’s shoulder cover itself with brand new white skin.

Kei’s breathing was ragged.

“…You fucking assholes.” His shoulders moved greatly with his heavy breathing as he glared at the bandits in front of him. Their forms reflected in the pupils of his bloodshot, tear-soaked eyes. Turning all his pain into anger, he shouted, “—I’ll fucking kill you both!”

He kicked off the ground.

The fight had abruptly begun once again.

Kei’s target was Rat, the short sword wielder. Rat had a better grasp of using stealth than Morissette and leaving him to move freely after his recent attack would make him a difficult enemy. Therefore, Kei decided to crush him straightforwardly.

The silhouette of Kei’s cloak hovered as the clear, shrill sound of the transparent glass bottle flying straight for Rat’s face whistled through the air. He hadn’t even thrown the bottle; he’d merely flicked it with a finger. The speed, the bloodlust, and power were all half-hearted, but it was that half-heartedness that attracted their attention to the bottle.

“!”

In the faint light of the dying campfire, Rat reflexively defended with his short sword, hitting the bottle in the air.

It exploded into fragments, several of which hit Rat in the face. They didn't get in his eyes, but they were sharp enough to cut his face. Rat flinched and let out a, "Ooh?"

"Rat!"

Kei was closing the distance between himself and Rat, so Morissette raised his sword at Kei to try and cover for Rat.

Kei grabbed a handful of arrows from his quiver with his right hand and whipped them at Morissette with an underhand throw.

"Hah!?" Morissette shouted in shock.

The attack had no aim whatsoever, it merely relied on his strength. It was so direct, dodging them all would be difficult to do. With the wood, iron, and fletching as the raw materials that composed the arrows, they were more than heavy enough. In addition, with the good quality of his arrows, simply pushing the arrowheads against flesh would be enough to pierce it. And, they were thrown with Kei's strength.

Morissette barely managed to cut one arrow down, but there were way too many, so he twisted out of the way to avoid the rest. However, the pain from the cut in his ankle caused him to lose balance for a moment and he almost fell.

That one moment was lethal.

In that gap, Kei twisted as he rushed through the distance and reached Rat.
"Guuoooraaaa!"

He roared so aggressively that it couldn't be for intimidation, and he made a show of raising his right fist over his head.

Rat trembled because Kei was closer to a wild animal than a battle-enthusiast. Despite that, he raised his short sword out of habit, and moved into a stance ready to counter Kei's straight punch. While Rat's attention was focused solely on his right fist, Kei slowly moved his left fist and struck Rat in the chest.

Taken by surprise from the impact, Rat's right hand lightly jumped up. This caused the

sword in his right hand to interfere with the one in his left. With both of Rat's swords out of the way, his torso was unmistakably defenseless.

Whoosh, the wind coiled along Kei's leg as he drove an utterly merciless kick into Rat's crotch.

A sickening sound that would make all of a person's hair stand on end, rang out. Kei's foot lifted Rat clear off the ground for a moment. It was a critical hit. Rat let out a pig-like squeal and his eyes almost popped out of his head.

Then Rat groaned, the straight punch was coming.

His cheek muscle enveloped Kei's fist, the bones warped, the joints jarred; Rat's jaw and teeth were shattered. Furthermore, to finish Rat off, Kei put all of his weight into a heavy elbow right into Rat's face. Kei had no intention of holding back his pain, anger, and adrenaline; he went full throttle. It was Kei's full strength in every sense. Rat's flesh was ripped to pieces and his face was destroyed in an instant. It genuinely looked like the impact of a monster, and Rat, who took the hit, was blown away like a rubber ball. Even after the ground tore him up on impact, he continued to roll. When he finally came to a stop, he didn't so much as twitch.

Vermillion - Chapter 11.2

CHAPTER 11-2

“U-a-aaaaahhaaahh!!” Morissette’s scream slid out as his face stiffened.

Shock. Hatred. Sorrow. What he felt was none of these, only pure terror.

—Not yet, not yet, I can still… such thoughts flashed through his mind. I can do it, I can still do it.

So he thought since his opponent was essentially unarmed. On the other hand, even though Morissette’s group was wiped out, even though the situation wasn’t ideal, even though his ankle was wounded, even though his heart was broken, for what it was worth, he still had his longsword.

Kei turned his head and set his sights on Morissette.

“A-aa-aaaahh!!” screamed Morissette as he stirred himself to lift his sword and charge.

However, Kei moved to meet him without hesitation. His movements flowing like water, Kei pulled an arrow from his quiver as he turned to face Morissette, and threw it.

The arrow moved slowly enough that Morissette was able to knock it to the ground with a swing of his longsword. However, Kei was already bent over picking up both of Rat’s shortswords.

He threw them one after the other. Once again, the attacks lacked any real force. Morissette turned to dodge one sword, and swatted down the other as he closed in, but when he saw the next thing Kei picked up, the blood drained from his face.

A bow.

A vermillion bow.

Even in the darkness of the nearly extinguished fire, the vermillion bow gleamed beautifully and glamorously.

An arrow was nocked.

The creaking of the bow being drawn all the way back sounded like the gates of hell themselves opening.

It was aimed directly at him.

It was decided.

Cold sweat dripped down Morissette's face. So much bloodlust poured from Kei's body that it felt like the air itself was ready to burst.

Anger. Resentment. Excitement. Ecstasy. Authority.

Kei felt none of these, yet his face unconsciously curled into something close to a smile.

The corners of his mouth were slanted upwards as he spoke, "—What do you say?[1]"

Faced with the question Morissette tried an obsequious smile, but failed. Even so, he said with his almost-smile, "I'm sorry.[1]"

Twang.

At nearly the same time he heard the sound, the arrow shot through his right knee.

"—!" Morissette silently screamed. His kneecap and joints were destroyed and he lost the functionality of his right leg. His leg folded over the wrong way and he collapsed to the ground. "—ah! Oh—!!!" He screamed, his body trembling. He might have writhed or squirmed, but the pain was so intense he couldn't even do that.

Kei paid him no heed as he pulled the next arrow from his quiver and slowly nocked it.

He waited for a short time.

Morissette was gasping, unable to get enough air. Kei spoke to him once more. “I’ll give you one last chance. Answer my question.”

At those words, Morissette raised his sweat covered face and stared at Kei while nodding over and over.

“It’s a simple question. Earlier, you said, ‘I have the antidote for the Enslavement Poison.’ Is that true?”

“I-It’s tr-true!” Morissette stuttered as he forced his answer out.

“So then, the poison you used is indeed ‘Enslavement Poison’, right?”

“Y-yes…”

“Swear it.”

Kei’s cold voice startled the trembling Morissette, who reached for the fallen longsword nearby, and grabbed the hilt. “I swear… It’s true…”

“Say that the poison is ‘Enslavement Poison’.”

“O-okay… The poison is without a doubt ‘Enslavement Poison’, I s-swear…” Morissette tightly grasped the hilt of his sword with both hands and spoke as if begging God for His mercy.

Kei was certain that he felt no bloodlust from the sword. In order to use Stealth he would need his mind to be calm, so Kei deemed it would be hard for Morissette to use it now.

With a weapon in hand, it would be extraordinarily hard to lie to Kei.

In 『Demondal』, lying was closely related to ‘bloodlust’.

The bloodlust system was largely divided into two parameters. These weren’t visible numerically, but players still referred to them as parameters; ‘Threat Level’ and ‘Ill Intent’.

Firstly, ‘Threat Level’ was an indication of the degree of danger an aggressor was.

At least in the game, all objects that had the possibility of interfering with a player had a predetermined ‘Threat Level’.

In the case of a person, the value was at its lowest when they had no weapons.

However, if they were to hold a wooden club, a stone, or something of that sort, then the value would increase slightly. And if they held a knife, sword, or something else that was deemed ‘sufficient to kill’ then their ‘Threat Level’ would jump up.

This parameter had a common base for various mobs and NPCs, but it would change slightly for mobs of similar Race based on their physical statuses such as strength and weight, if they used a weapon or their claws and if they had tusks or fangs. Nonliving things, such as falling rocks, landslides, or other natural disasters also had a ‘Threat Level’.

Next, ‘Ill Intent’ reflected how strong one’s bloodlust is. The purpose of this parameter was to largely increase or decrease the predetermined ‘Threat Level’.

For example, if a creature with a low ‘Threat Level’ incorporated a strong bloodlust[2] into their attack, then their resulting ‘Threat Level’ would also greatly increase.

Alternatively, if one had a clear mind and was in a state of self-effacement when they struck with a sword, their ‘Threat Level’ would drop to nearly zero, resulting in them giving off an extremely weak bloodlust.

By the way, happenstance occurrences that don’t have a will or intent to explicitly cause harm, such as falling rocks or natural disasters, were given a flat value for their ‘Ill Intent’

to adjust their ‘Threat Level’.

In addition, the ‘Ill Intent’ parameter was largely affected by the act of telling a lie.

‘Ill Intent’ is, in essence, bloodlust.

When someone tells a lie, their mentality becomes that of trying to deceive someone else, which was treated as malice or ill intent. Therefore, when lying while holding a weapon, the ill intent was made detectable after it was translated to bloodlust through the weapon.

In a case where someone lied while not holding a weapon their ‘Threat Level’ and ‘Ill Intent’ were both low, which resulted in a bloodlust so weak that even Kei couldn’t sense it with his Passive Sense.

There was a method called ‘Oath’ that used this system in the game.

Players would hold a sword or a spear and ‘Swear By The Oath’ when coming to an agreement, proving they were sincere, or possibly as proof that one did not lie.

People called Stealth masters, such as Kei or Andrei the Ninja, were able to swear by the oath while lying at negotiation tables easily, as long as they were mentally calm. However, among the general player-base, it was exceedingly rare that someone could completely erase their bloodlust through Stealth, so the method ‘Swear By The Oath’ became popular. It also gave a cool vibe when saying something like ‘I swear by my sword.’

At any rate, it was valid in the game and was equally valid in this world due to the existence of bloodlust.

In Morissette’s case, he was able to utilize Stealth well enough that regular people couldn’t detect his bloodlust, but with his destroyed leg tormenting him, it would be difficult for him to calm his mind.

Since he had sworn by the oath, with both hands gripping his sword, ‘The poison is ‘Enslavement Poison’.’ it was highly likely that this information was accurate.

“I see, thank you.” Kei nodded slightly, accepting Morissette’s oath.

“Th-then…”

Morissette had a tiny ray of hope.

However, Kei remained silent as he nocked another arrow and raised his bow. “I no longer have a use for you.”
“Wha!?” Morissette’s eyes widened in surprise at Kei’s merciless words. “Y-you said you would spare me…”

“I never said I would ‘spare’ you. I only said ‘I will give you one last chance.’” asserted Kei, his bow creaking as he drew it. “I gave you the chance to come clean, didn’t I?”

“You’re kidding…” Morissette looked into Kei’s eyes. His face paled and his lips quivered. He understood in an instant that there wasn’t any hope. “That’s… it’s wrong…” he muttered.

With a grim expression Kei spat out, “It’s your own fault for deceiving me.”

Twang.

The last thing Morissette saw was a glint of silver rushing toward him.

And then the back of Kei with his bow ready.

Then the illusion of an innocent young girl clad in an angel’s raiment.

A terribly innocent young girl with a radiant smile.

Then he heard the sound of water as his vision was dyed red.

He lost consciousness.

Kei turned and hurried to Mikazuki's side, leaving the fallen Morissette behind.

The dark brown bowser horse didn't move in the slightest. Kei fell to his knees beside him, placed his hand on the horse's neck, and called his name. For a short while he remained silent before cursing and biting his lower lip.

Mikazuki showed no signs of life.

Mikazuki had become an empty shell. He was dead; his eyes remained closed and a small amount of bloody foam leaked from his mouth. Kei's first thought when he saw the arrow in Mikazuki's side was that, even if the arrow hadn't been poisoned it may have been too late.

The way his kidney and liver had been struck, it was almost like that was their target all along. Without several bottles of potions, it would have been impossible to keep him alive for medical treatment.

"…It hurt, didn't it? I'm sorry," said Kei as he stroked Mikazuki's mane.

With the corpse in front of him, feelings of guilt finally began to ooze out, but he didn't have the time to mourn over the death of his horse.

Kei stood up quickly and looked toward the woods. "…It's a little far to run."

Kei furrowed his brow. In terms of stats, he was confident in his stamina, but he could only run so fast. Travelling at full speed from here to Tahfu on Mikazuki would take a little under ten minutes. Just how much time would it take to go by foot? Would Aileen be able to hold on?

He sighed and placed his right hand on the nape of his neck. He felt around his neck for a moment before grabbing a thin chain with his bracer and pulling it across his chest.

At the end of the silver chain was a pale-green, transparent emerald the size of one's

thumbnail.

This was a top quality item that would cost a fortune on its own. Kei let it hang from his right hand and stared at it before switching his gaze to Mikazuki’s corpse.

“…Mikazuki is here, so you should be too,” he said almost as a prayer.

『Mi dedicas al vi tiun katalizilo.』

He whispered the chant as if reciting a script and then kissed the emerald.

Immediately afterwards—

Hehehehe.

He heard a small, muffled sounding laugh.

He couldn’t be sure of where it came from.

Hehehe. Hehehe.

The laugh mixed with the leaves rustling in the wind.

It seemed to be coming from every direction at once.

—Kei—

It was in his ear.

—Vi estas vere agrabla—

It was a sweet whisper that made his earlobe feel like it was melting.

Crack. Countless cracks suddenly appeared in the hanging emerald.

The cracks quickly increased in number and the green emerald started turning white.

Before long, it shattered into particles finer than grains of sand and blew away in the wind, melting into the black night.

After seeing that, Kei faced the empty sky and called out.

『Maiden vento, Siv.』

He took a deep breath.

『Vi aperos.』(Manifest.)

At that moment, Kei felt like something very important was being taken from within his body.

†　　†　　†

Vermillion - Chapter 11.3

CHAPTER 11-3

“Viesta, Granda, Visaniji, Tyuperosouno…”

The room was dimly lit by candles’ flickering flames.

“Viesta, Granda, Visaniji, Tuperosouno…” continued the old woman’s hoarse, monotonous voice.

They were in Cronen’s house in Tahfu.

Aileen lay on the small bed still unconscious and suffering from a fever.

Four villagers were around the bed. Those four stayed wide awake while awaiting Kei’s return.

Anka, the village’s oldest shaman, was one of those four and sat in a chair close to the bed, doing what she could for Aileen’s fever-induced nightmares.

Ever since Kei left, she’d been chanting a healing mantra and carefully wiping Aileen’s forehead clean of sweat with a wet cloth. It was also her job to give Aileen a small dose of the potions left by Kei when her complexion suddenly worsened.

“…Anka-san, are you alright? It’s already very late, and I could take over,” Cronen shyly suggested from near the wall.

“It’s fine. This is nothing, so don’t worry,” she said slowly.

Somehow, Cronen looked a little disappointed as he backed off with an, “I see…”

Originally, Cronen’s job wasn’t to nurse Aileen, but rather to watch over her in case she was one of the bandits. However, after realizing that she was in no way part of the bandits

and was actually on her deathbed he'd tried desperately to help care for her.

It was because, out of all the people there, Kei had asked Cronen alone to take care of Aileen. But Anka was caught up in her sense of duty and kept politely refusing his help.

The hunter Mandel, with his characteristically good looking features, leaned silently against the wall, ignoring the two who worried over Aileen as he stared blankly into the empty air.

One could never tell what he was thinking due to his pronounced, chiseled features. However, right now he was more worried about Kei, who went to battle the bandits, than Aileen, whose life depended on the potions.

Since Kei was able to shoot down a bat in the dark it didn't seem too reckless, but some part of him still wouldn't settle down. After thinking that, he was reminded of the magnificent vermillion bow that Kei had. From the sound when it shot the arrow, he knew it was a very strong bow. His thoughts veered away from concern as he wondered if Kei would let him hold it once he got back. Once he thought about that, he became concerned for Kei's well-being, then he thought about the bow again… He was stuck in an endless loop.

"…Haa." A small sigh came from the corner of the room. A short distance away from the other three, the village leader, Bennett, sat silently staring at Aileen with his arms folded. Such a shame…

Bennett looked sour as Anka gave Aileen the little bit of potion that was left.

Summing up Bennett's feelings in one word would be, 'wasteful'. He had to witness such valuable High Potions go to waste delaying the inevitable on a girl dying of poison. If they had this much, then just how many lives could be saved from sickness or injury in Tahfu and even the neighboring villages, he thought, vexed.

Kei said that he would go and ask what type of poison the bandits used, but that was impossible, Bennett thought.

There was the problem of a numbers disadvantage, but moreover it was that his opponents were the infamous 『Ignaz Bandits』. They'd been docile these past few years, but there was a time when simply hearing their name was enough to make even seasoned soldiers

flinch. Kei did have a good horse, so he should at least be able to run away, however, if his questioning turned into fighting then he probably wouldn't be coming back alive, predicted Bennett.

And here potions were being wasted on a single girl.

Such a damn waste… he thought with regret, as he stroked his beard.

Actually, he'd suggested to the other three that they stop giving Aileen the potions not long ago. He proposed they purposely let her die and pocket the rest of the bottles, and in the case that Kei did come back, telling him that all the potions had been used, so there was nothing they could do.

But it was rejected unanimously.

'That boy will definitely come back!' Anka baselessly declared.

'That would be terrible.' Cronen said without any other reasons.

And then Mandel refused by saying, 'I would not be able to get away with lying to him.'

They all had their own reasons, but they all had a strong opinion, so he reluctantly gave up on stealing the potions.

Even so…

It was frustrating. Extremely frustrating.

His expression turned even more sour while watching Anka's back as she gave Aileen the potion.

…Well, I suppose there's no helping it.

Bennett lightly sighed again, but just as he did, the wind outside blew fiercely. "Hmm?" But he quickly dismissed it as nothing more than the wind. But, he felt uneasy. Outside the parchment blocked window, something flashed by.

The parchment shook unnaturally.

Something—Cold air came in.

Abruptly, a sudden gust of wind blew through the room with a boom.

“Uuohh!?”

“What the!?”

There were various exclamations of surprise. The gust that entered the room proceeded to unnaturally extinguish all the candles.

The room went pitch black—they couldn’t see a thing.

Or, at least, they shouldn’t have been able to.

On the other side of the darkness, Bennett and the others were on alert.

A young girl innocent-looking girl dressed like an angel appeared.

“Whaaaa-!?”

“Who the hell are you!?”

The men shouted in shock with trembling voices. But at the appearance of the girl smiling innocently, Anka shrieked, “G-ghooooooost!!”

“A spirit!? This is…?” It was as if she were a phantom or a monster. They vaguely felt that something was there; the thing’s weak appearance and the uncanny sensation Bennett felt made him question it involuntarily.

Then, before the four of them, the smiling girl began.

—En la nomo de miaj abonant oj, mi transdonu lian mesagxon—

Her speech was so polished, it did not match her feeling of innocence.
“Ooh, thank you, thank you…”

“Old woman, can you understand what it’s saying?” Bennet, who didn’t understand a word of what the girl said, asked Anka, who was on both knees while rubbing her hands together in gratitude.

“As if I could know, it’s the spirit language, you know!”

Bennett almost slipped off his chair after hearing her answer. “You’re thanking it without even knowing what it’s saying?!”

“I’m just thankful for such a beautiful spirit coming here!”

Taken aback, Bennett was finally about to retort, but at that moment—

“[Can you hear me? It’s Kei. Anka-san, can you hear me?]” Kei’s voice resounded in the room.

“—Kei! Is that Kei!?” Mandel shouted with his eyes wide.

“[—There isn’t much time so I’ll be brief. I’m having the spirit I’ve contracted carry my message. The poison is ‘Enslavement Poison’. The antidote is the red pill. Anka-san, the antidote is the red pill. Please, one will be enough.]”

“Kei, are you alright!? Where are you?!” Mandel asked in the direction of the girl, but no one, neither the girl nor Kei, replied.

— Jen cio —

The girl only gave those short words.

The wind suddenly howled through the room again.

Silence enveloped the room and everyone was dumbfounded.

“…The red pill!” Anka said, the first one to come back to her senses.

“Cronen! Fire! We need light!”

“A-ah, I got it!”

Following Anka’s orders, Cronen ran out of the room hurriedly and quickly brought hot coals in from outside.

He lit a candle; a light source was secured.

Anka grabbed the small metal box of medicines that Kei had entrusted her with.

The box had three sections with various medicines. And there it was. It was definitely the right one. A red pill.

“Now, I’ll save your friend…!”

Anka raised the pill in trembling hands, parted Aileen’s lips, and gave her the pill along with some water.

In the end, Aileen—…

† † †

A short while later.

A man covered in sweat came running into Tahfu.

It was Kei.

Being a pure fighter, the recoil from using such magic put him nearly at death's door, but he immediately sprinted full speed over several kilometers anyway, causing him to come in gasping and feeling twice as nauseous and fatigued.

His cheeks were cut up, his right shoulder was soaked with blood, and his face was as pale as a ghost. The guards on watch didn't even call for the village leader, they just opened the way without a word.

Kei was staggering as he ran into the village. He ran off the gravel path and flew into Cronen's familiar, small house.

"Aileen!"

Bang! When the small door to the room slammed open, four villagers crowding around a bed in the dim candle light snapped their heads around.

"H-how… is… Aileen!?" Kei gasped.

"Kei-dono, settle down."

Anka stood up from the chair next to the bed and grabbed Kei's hand, who breathed heavily, drawing him to the bedside. "Thanks to you…we saved her."

Laying there, on the bed.

Aileen laid there with a relaxed expression and the slow breathing of sleep.

"…Aah." Kei fell to his knees and stroked her hair with a sweet smile on his face.

He could feel her warmth through his fingers. She was alive.

—Thank God.

There were a lot of things to think about and a lot of things to regret, but somehow, Aileen was saved.
“Thank God… Thank—” At the same time that he sighed in relief, he slumped to the floor and was pulled along into the pleasant darkness of unconsciousness.

Afterword

The bandit(?) section is finally over.

It’s the opening of their trip to a parallel world but it’s already over 100,000 characters (in Japanese)…

It seems that there were a lot of people concerned with Kei not seeing through Morissette’s lie, so I explained how the bloodlust system works.

In Chapter 8 I lightly touched on the subject of needing a weapon, but the explanation was a little insufficient.

The reason that Kei couldn’t see through Morissette’s lie is because Morissette threw down his sword before prostrating himself. Therefore, hardly any bloodlust was released.

Vermillion - Chapter 12.1

12. **Relic**

It was a deep sleep, one without even dreams.

As if realizing it were an illusion, Kei suddenly awoke with a short gasp.

There was a sensation as if he'd been dragged up from the bottom of the ocean all the way to the surface at once. Above his narrow bed, the first thing he saw was a plain wooden ceiling. He quickly sat up straight, trying to shake off the remaining drowsiness.

The room he was in was cozy.

Gentle sunlight shone in from the open window. The room was spotlessly clean; there wasn't even a speck of dust. However, it was packed so full with bundles of bug repellant herbs, chests, and other various everyday commodities that it gave off the impression of a storeroom.

Somehow—it looked familiar.

Huh? Isn't this the room Aileen was sleeping in?

Yes, this was definitely the house of Cronen, the village leader's second son. However, he was monopolizing the only bed in the room as if it were his.

Aileen.

"…Where did she go?!" He tried to jump out of bed as he shouted, but he suddenly felt a sharp pain in his left cheek. "Agh…" he groaned and stopped, timidly reaching a hand to his face. It felt rough and ached. It seemed that there was some sort of compress stuck to

his cheek like a scab. It's where he was cut during his fight with the bandits last night. He recalled leaving it untreated.

I guess someone treated it…

The tips of his fingers gave off a smell of medicine that tickled his nose. The village shaman Anka probably doubled as their medicine woman and did this. Once again met with pain when he touched the inside of his cheek with his tongue, he got a little depressed thinking that it would be hard to speak or eat for a while.

But that didn't matter, not right now.

Aileen. Where did she go?

Kei slipped out of bed, opened the door with a heavy thud, and left the room. On top of being small, the structure was simple, the door opened to the living room. In the center was a dining table, at which sat a little girl going, "Aaah," with her mouth open and a spoon full of soup in hand. Their eyes locked.

Kei remained in the doorway and she froze with her spoon still in front of her face.

She was a cute little girl, probably around three or maybe four years old. She stared with wide, reddish-brown eyes at Kei. Her chestnut hair fell to her shoulders and her lightly freckled face radiated innocence. She was frozen stiff as if she had run into a bear or something.

"…Hi," Kei awkwardly smiled and tried to start a conversation to relieve her nervousness.

However, he had completely forgotten his own appearance.

He was wearing armor that was painted with his own and others' blood, his muscular body towered over others in this world, and because of his wound, his smile appeared crooked and menacing. Of course an innocent little girl would be scared of such a villainous looking character.

"Kyaaaaaa!" A beat late she screamed cutely. She jumped out of her chair and ran outside, still holding the spoon, as she yelled, "Mama—!"

The steaming soup on the dining table was the only other thing there. Dejected, Kei lowered his hand.

After a short time, the sound of small footsteps running came from outside.

A young freckle-faced girl came into the house. “Good morning. I see that you’ve woken up.”

Her hands were wet, perhaps from doing laundry, and she wiped them off on her apron as she looked down.

Kei thought that he had seen her somewhere before. He remembered the young freckle-faced girl giving him a warm welcome last night and telling him the news of Aileen nearly dying while he was at the village leader’s house. Considering the situation, she was probably Cronen’s wife.

“Morning. And sorry, it seems that I frightened your daughter.” Kei shrugged, looking towards the doorway.

From outside the little girl was peeking in the door, but she quickly hid.

“No, she just isn’t used to people from outside the village… She’s probably just nervous. Jessica, come on out.”

“No!” She responded to her mother from outside.

Kei gave a wry smile, Well she doesn’t seem to like me.

“Ah, I’m Tina, Cronen’s wife.”

“I’m Kei, nice to meet you. If you don’t mind, I’d like to ask, the person that I brought was left here for care. Do you know where she is right now?”

“Your friend is at the village leader’s house.”

Kei sighed in relief after hearing her brisk reply.

“I see, so she’s awake again…”

“Oh, no, she’s still sleeping.”

“Huh?”

Kei thought that because she was awake she’d been invited to the village leader’s house, but it seemed that assumption was wrong.

Then, to answer why he had taken her place here, Tina said, “Yesterday, my husband and some others tried to carry you when you collapsed, but you were too heavy for them to move you far. Your friend was very light, so we thought it would be easier to move her to the village leader’s house and have you stay here…”

“Oh… Sorry, I suppose I gave you some trouble.”

If he had on his full armor on top of his large, muscular body, then of course he’d be heavy. His bracers, shin guards, helmet, and other small pieces of gear were removed, but with just his leather chest piece and chainmail he would still be quite heavy.

But, where did his armor and Dragon Stinger go?
“Ah, your armor is with our village’s leatherworker. Fathe— The village leader asked for him to look at it.” She said, anticipating his intention, when she saw Kei feel for the scabbard on his waist and casually look around.

“I see, thank you.” He thought that maybe they had stolen his stuff, so knowing exactly where it all went relieved him. Well… I guess when I went unconscious, if the villagers were all evil, they would’ve stripped both me and Aileen of all our belongings.

A village-wide robbery. There wasn’t such a harsh trap in the game, but the world did reference such acts often in documents. A cold sensation ran down his back when he considered Tahfu to be one of those villages. And then he realized that he was only thinking of such possibilities now, even though he was so calm last night.

After explaining the situation, Tina's expression grew confused when she saw Kei's face turn serious as he got lost in thought.

Before the silence grew too long, "Hey, I see you're up." Cronen spoke from outside the door, holding four or five pitchforks on his shoulder. A thin sweat coated his forehead, it seems he was doing some farm work.

"Yeah, thanks to a good rest I'm much better now. Sorry for the trouble."

"What are you talking about, it's not a problem at all." Cronen smiled in response to Kei's gratitude.

Kei tilted his head and thought that Cronen was much more friendly than last night.

"Oh yeah, now that you're awake, my father wanted to talk to you. Are you ready?"

"The village leader's house?"

"Yeah."

He also wanted to check on Aileen so he replied without hesitation, "Yeah, let's go."

Kei gave a serious nod. And then his stomach gave a magnificently loud growl. He failed to understand what just happened and Cronen blinked in surprise. A small giggle escaped Tina before she spun around with her hand over her mouth, trembling slightly.

At some point, Jessica must have hidden behind Cronen because she came out and asked in a nasally voice, "Are you hungry?"

"So it would seem." Kei answered as if talking about a different person, causing Cronen and Tina to laugh loudly. He had admired the phenomenon of one's stomach rumbling when they were hungry since he was young, but he said it so seriously that he inadvertently made it even funnier.

"Tina, there's still some soup left, right?" Cronen asked through his smile.

“Yes, there is.”

“Give our starving guest some lunch. I’ll call my father here.” He ruffled Jessica’s hair and quickly left the house. He laughed unrestrained outside.

Jessica was left standing and staring up at Kei with big round eyes as she licked her spoon like candy.
“Please, take a seat. It’s just normal soup, but I hope you’ll like it.”

In a wooden bowl, she served Kei some soup from a ceramic pot while smiling.

Finally getting embarrassed, Kei sat down with a, “Thanks.”

Jessica sat down across from Kei and kicked her legs back and forth under the table as she began to eat again.

Now that he had soup, he also began to eat. It was a viscous yellow soup. It had a rough texture and it gave off a faint sweet aroma. It seemed like the only thing used to season it was salt; perhaps the ingredients were good, but it really brought out the vegetables’ flavors.

“…It’s good. What is it?”

“It’s pumpkin porridge. Try dipping some bread in it,” she suggested as she picked up a basket with some hard bread.

The bread was pretty hard, but it looked like it would be easy to eat if it soaked up some soup.

After taking one taste of the relaxing vegetable and grain meal, Kei became aware of just how hungry he was, and he began to eat enthusiastically. He thought it was weird that Jessica didn’t reach for the bread at all, but it was probably difficult for a little girl to eat the hard bread. Instead, it looked like some rice was mixed into her soup to make a risotto.

Tina continued to stir the pot with a big grin, periodically refilling the bowl that Kei

emptied apologetically, as she watched over the two of them.

“I’m back!” Bennett’s house and Cronen’s house weren’t that far apart. The timing seemed almost intentional, but Cronen came back after just long enough for Kei to start feeling relaxed.

“Kei-dono, I’m glad to see you’re awake.” Bennett’s cane thumped as he came in.

Danny was just behind him with his insincere smile.